THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

# THE DEVELOPMENT OF AMBROSE BIERCE'S PROSE STYLE

BY

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For my Father and Mother.

# ABSTRACT

This study is an analysis, chiefly rhetorical, of Ambrose Bierce's prose style. The method used is to trace the development of this style by means of an extended consideration of twelve journalistic passages, dating from 1868 to 1887 and dealing with the clergy.

These passages are taken from his "Town Crier" columns in the *San Francisco News-Letter and California Advertiser* and in the London weekly, *Figaro*; and from his "Prattle" columns in three San Francisco newspapers, the *Argonaut*, the *Wasp*, and the *Examiner*. In addition to the twelve key passages from the columns in these five papers, supportive material is drawn from the rest of Bierce's journalism, from his Civil War journal, and from his *Collected Works*.

The study concludes that Bierce's growing stylistic skill is accompanied by and results from an increasing facility in placing the elements of prose--from individual letters to full paragraphs--in such a way that these elements complement and have the greatest possible influence upon each other. By his second decade as a journalist he was an artist as well, in that he was a master of words and of concision; his habit of consciously ordering the molecules of syntax to derive expression from compression had transformed an initially worthless style into one of exceptional subtlety and power.

Bierce's best-known work, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," is included as a touchstone against which this conclusion is tested; a consideration of this story, in light of the stylistic traits previously educed from analyses of the journalism, largely composes the study's final section.

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# INTRODUCTION

After witnessing some of the phenomiona of a tropic sea, we arrived at Aspinwall on the 10th of Sept. at daylight and found ourselvs at once in the heart of the tropics. The first object that attracted my attention after going ashore was a groop of Cocoa Palms with the nuts thick upon them. The next thing that impressed me was the free and easy impudence of the native black boys asking to carry my luggage. I noticed the gardain of the Washington full of roses and briliant blossoms. Coming out of "the companies" grounds I could glance down the main street of the town It was filled with a throng of natives, mostly women, pedling fruits and confctionary. I walked back and forward through the crowd to enjoy the strange sights and sounds. "Buy Orange," calls a tall twany mulatto girl "Good Lemoneed" honey." cries another.

Not sattisfied with what I saw on the main street, I went round to explor the back part of the town.

Aspinwall is built on a coral reaf. Hallows in all directions form malarious swamps. Filth universal the rude cleanliness in the dresses of the women formed a pleasing contrast. The main part of the town is buildt of slovenly wooden houses back of those are Palm hutts. Some pleasent houses there are on the esplanade. Palm trees of different kinds I found growing all through the town.--unknown plants on every side.

The throngs of great black buzzards sitting on every roof and tree, and hopping fearlessly about in the offall strewn streets was in keeping with the general appearance The people cut beaf into long stripes and hang it on racks in the sun to dry. One of these racks I noticed the buzzards were watching suddenly a dairing old fellow hopped towards it; flapping up amongst the long tempting slices commenced a ravenous attack; at this a half nude old woman rushed out upon him with cries and after repeatedly walloping him over the head with a towl succeeded in driving him off.

They have a very respectable episcopal Church here. The principal fruit vended in the street were Oranges from Jamaica, large and fresh. Lemonds. Limes, Alagator Peirs [sketch of a pear in cross-section]. Pomagranits. Mauva peirs. Mangos, Cocoa Nuts.

> Pineapples, Agauvas. I Procured an indifferent meal at the Howard House for one Dollar in silver. The train started at 12:30. We went dashing along through the midst of tropical swamps Tropical in earnest. Scarcely a single plant or tree had I seen before. And every thing growing so luxurious and on so jigantic a scale. From Aspinwall the first 10 or 12 miles of road is mostly through swamp. Near Panama Hills and Mountains predomonate. All along the RR the ground is covered with the sensitave plant. Prostrate, prickley, compound leaved, [sketch of a plant] and very sensitave it was to. Cane grew in the swamps, the same we have in the south. only it was 80 or 100 feet in length and from 4 to 6 inches in diamiter. Palmettos grow but not plenty. Four different kinds of Palms I noticed. Besides the breadfruit tree with fruit well matured. I plucked some of the fruit and punctured it. a milky sap jeted out, which rapidly thickened like starch. tasted like sage. The Stevens tree [sketch of a tree] Remarkable trees [similar sketch]. I saw many parots and one ringtailed Monkey. Panama is a quaint old town almost crowded into the sea By the Mountains. Sentinells were stationed at each car as we halted. They were slovenly Negros and looked quite unservisable. The Bay of Panama is full of little Islands.--is very shole so that Steamers have to lie out 3 miles. Passengers are taken out in a kind of steam-ferry. The bay is full of larg fish, sharks &c. that, dashing about make a beautiful display of its phosphoresence.

Ambrose Bierce was not, to put it mildly, much of a stylist when he wrote these lines at the age of twenty-three. They record his impressions of a visit to Colon shortly after the close of the Civil War.[1] The shortcomings are obvious and need no comment; one would hardly expect the author of this piece to become, and remain, a significant figure in American letters.

If there is little in these lines to suggest that their author might one day be a literary man, there is not much more in his earliest background to suggest that he might one day be literate. He was born, the youngest of nine children, on June 24, 1842, in a settlement called Horse Cave, Meigs County, Ohio.[2] This area was primitively rural and fervently evangelical, both of which qualities Bierce detested even then. If Bierce as a boy did not (as Carey McWilliams suggests he might have done) stampede an old horse laden with blazing straw into the midst of a revival meeting, such a gesture was at least entirely in character for him at a time when his satiric bent was necessarily baffled and inarticulate. Bierce never lost his loathing of "perspirational piety," nor was he ever reconciled to the rustic provincialism of his childhood. (In November, 1883 he published, in the *Wasp*, a travesty of "The Old Oaken Bucket"--a pitilessly naturalistic description of this early barnyard environment that would have done credit to Hamlin Garland at his bleakest.[3])

The family moved several times, arriving in Indiana in the late 1840's. Bierce grew up in the area around Warsaw, and, later, Elkhart. It was in the latter city that Bierce came under the influence of his uncle, General Lucius Verus Bierce, a good example of the mid-nineteenth century American patriot-abolitionist. It was he who captured Windsor, Ontario briefly in 1837; it was he who furnished John Brown with weapons; he who arranged an appointment for Ambrose at the Kentucky Military Institute in 1859; and it was he who supplied the pattern for his nephew's early career.[4]

Bierce returned from the Kentucky Military Institute in 1860, and enlisted the following year as a private in the Ninth Indiana Infantry. Three months later he was a sergeant, a year after that a sergeant-major, in November 1862 a second lieutenant, and the following February a first lieutenant. Shortly after this promotion he was transferred to the staff of his brigade commander, W. B. Hazen, with whom he served until the war's end. During this time he participated in fourteen battles, among them Philippi, Shiloh, Corinth, Murfreesboro, Chickamauga, Missionary Ridge, Kenesaw Mountain (where he was seriously wounded), and Franklin. He was demobilized, a brevet major, in January, 1865.

He worked until autumn of 1865 as a treasury agent in Alabama, then made a brief journey to Panama, his record of which heads this study. Shortly after returning, he accepted an invitation from General Hazen, his former commander, to accompany a military expedition through Indian Territory to the west coast. Bierce had reason to believe that he might find a captain's or major's commission waiting for him in San Francisco. The expedition was a success: he joined Hazen in Nebraska in the summer of 1866, and they were soon through the Black Hills and approaching Salt Lake. They inspected forts, hunted, and fished. Bierce acted as topographer, as he had during the war. The party then traveled north to Helena, south from there to Virginia City, and thence to San Francisco, arriving there three months after leaving Omaha. The commission waiting for Bierce was a disappointment: a second lieutenancy in the infantry. He refused this, cast about for a means of livelihood, and found a job at the San Francisco Sub-Treasury.

While there, he began to educate himself. He read the classics in a number of fields, particularly belles lettres.[5] Also, the local newspapers began to accept his sketches and articles. One such acceptance came from James T. Watkins, then editor of the *San Francisco News-Letter and California Advertiser*, and included an invitation to visit the paper's offices. Bierce did so, and soon became Watkins' friend and pupil. According to Laurence Berkove, "Bierce developed and polished his distinctively epigrammatic and biting style" at the Sub-Treasury.[6] It would be more accurate to say that until he met Watkins he had no distinctive style and that the polishing took several years. Mary Grenander was closer to the mark when she called his early style "hyperbolic, ironic bombast."[7] At any rate, he learned enough of the business to succeed Watkins as editor in December, 1868.

San Francisco in the late 1860's was quite a busy and prosperous city. The gold boom begun in 1849 was augmented by the silver strikes in Washoe a decade later, making San Francisco the capital of the West. It was here that the miner outfitted himself for his expeditions, here that he spent and invested his profits if he had been fortunate, and, if he had not, here that he got credit for further ventures. It was here, too, that many young literary men and women naturally gravitated, since the Bay City's burgeoning and heterogeneous population offered the best market, west of the Rocky Mountains, for their wares. Mark Twain, Bret Harte, and a number of lesser wits were publishing in San Francisco journals the sort of boisterously irreverent pieces that would come to be thought of as characteristically Western.

Satire, as Franklin Walker observed, was in the air, "and the most mordant of all was Marriott's *News-Letter and Commercial* [sic] *Advertiser*."[8]--edited by Bierce. Had Walker written "exuberant" for "mordant" he would have been closer to the truth: much of Bierce's earliest work puts one in mind of an energetic person gamely trying to split wood with an axe handle. He was, however, well on his way to mastering the trade when he married Mary Ellen Day, on Christmas, 1871. The two left San Francisco for London the following May. Although his father-in-law paid for the wedding trip, Bierce soon began supplementing his finances by writing for various periodicals, among them Tom Hood's *Fun* and James Mortimer's *Figaro*. Here, by way of contrast with his Panama Journal, are his impressions, tailored to journalism, of another new (and "jigantic") scene:

> I never had a correct notion of the immense size of London till last Saturday. I got into a railway carriage at Euston Station--not by any means in the middle of town--and away we sped toward the suburbs. In the compartment with me was a puffy old gentleman with mutton-chop whiskers, gold-bowed spectacles, and the longest feet! He had also a posy in his button-hole; no Englishman is quite at his ease unless he has a posy in his button-hole. I have seen men eight feet high and broad all out of proportion, stalking down the strand with the meanest of rosebuds and pinks crucified upon their lappels [sic]--fellows who ought to have been balancing anvils on their noses, and catching cannon-balls in the hollow of their backs. I don't think you could grow a flower so lean and crippled and mangy that an Englishman wouldn't wear it if he could get no better one without waiting a week.
>
> This merry old gentleman was reading an article in the *Times*--an article I had written myself upon the Indirect Claims. When he had done he turned to me and said:
>
> "You are an American, I presume?"
>
> "I have that misfortune," I replied, languidly.
>
> "You may well call it a misfortune, sir," said he, "when the *Times* feels compelled to rebuke American presumption in such pointed language as this." And he read me the passage upon which I most plumed myself--into which I had thrown the entire weight of my intellect.
>
> "You are quite right, sir," said I, seeing I was expected to say *something*; that is the tallest kind of talk; and I am conscious that my nation has deserved it. I suppose the President, when he reads it, will appoint a day of humiliation and prayer--we never fast. It is, indeed, rough on us."
>
> "Humph! I rather think so, young man; but as you seem to take rebuke in the proper spirit, and to feel, like a sensible man, your national disgrace, I don't mind telling you *I* wrote that article."
>
> I began this narrative intending to illustrate the immense size of London. Starting from Euston Station, and travelling at the rate of thirty-five miles an hour, I had time to converse with this interesting old gentleman *all I wanted to* before reaching the city limits![9]

This was written seven years after the first piece and it strongly suggests that Bierce and the language had become better acquainted, that by 1872 he was a competent writer. Speaking of the Panama section quoted first, Laurence Berkove has rightly observed that, "if that bit of prose is at all typical of his casual style at the time, the improvement effected within a few years' time is truly impressive."[10] The improvement is impressive but there was room for more.

Bierce published his first three books--*The Fiend's Delight*, *Nuggets and Dust*, *Cobwebs*--in England, under the pseudonym "Dod Grile." The first two were composed mostly of reprinted and slightly revised *News-Letter* material, and the latter of the "Zambri" fables, originally written for *Fun*. It was in England, too, that the first of his three children, Day, was born. (Day, by all accounts a child genius, died at seventeen in a gun-fight.) Mrs. Bierce returned to San Francisco in spring, 1875, and her husband followed, arriving in the fall, in time for the birth of their second son, Leigh.

The depression of the 1870's had made employment scarce, and it was not until March, 1877 that Bierce secured a position, de facto editor of the *Argonaut*. This newspaper was founded by Frank Pixley, a rich vulgarian and ignoramus, for the purpose of baiting the Coolie-baiting Irish and of discrediting the Workingman's Party, a faction headed by the now obscure but then formidable demagogue Denis Kearney.

In spring, 1880, one of Bierce's wartime friends, Sherburne Eaton, offered him the general managership of the newly formed Black Hills Placer Mining Company, which he accepted and held for three months. He was plagued by incompetent and defalcating superiors during this time. Resigning in September, he returned to San Francisco and found that his job at the *Argonaut* had not been held open for him.

Bierce's observations on his journalistic colleagues--in the "Town Crier" column of the *News-Letter* and in the "Prattle" column of the *Argonaut*--had been so candid that no one would hire him. It was not until March of the following year that he found employment, this time on the *Wasp*, again as de facto editor, and again as the "Prattle" columnist. From 1881 to 1886 Bierce wrote for this paper, a lovely one, aptly named, which featured many large multi-colored cartoons. It was, unfortunately, secretly owned by the Spring Valley Water Company--unfortunately, because this arrangement enabled one of Bierce's enemies to call into question his honesty and independence, and because Bierce saw fit, in his ignorance of the *Wasp's* real owners, to publish several "analyses" of forksful of Spring Valley water. There were harsh words, the paper was finally sold, and Bierce was again unemployed.

He remained so for nearly a year, until late March, 1887. At that time he was visited by W. R. Hearst, whose father had recently given him the *San Francisco Examiner*. Bierce and Hearst struck a bargain, and "Prattle" began to appear once more. Bierce was the star columnist on the *Examiner* for the next nineteen years, the period in which he published his most well-known books. *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians* appeared in 1892, as did *The Monk and the Hangman's Daughter* and *Black Beetles in Amber; Can Such Things Be?* was brought out in 1893, *Fantastic Fables* in 1899, *Shapes of Clay* in 1903, *The Cynic's Word Book* (the title was later changed to *The Devil's Dictionary*) in 1906; *The Shadow on the Dial and Other Essays* and his *Collected Works* were published in 1909.

This is a final specimen of his style, taken from one of the better *Tales of Soldiers*, "Chickamauga"; it is his impression of old scenes, tailored to suit fiction: the soldierly little protagonist has been badly frightened by a rabbit, has become lost in the forest bordering his home, has fallen into an exhausted sleep; on waking,

> Suddenly he saw before him a strange moving object which he took to be some large animal--a dog, a pig--he could not name it; perhaps it was a bear. He had seen pictures of bears, but knew of nothing to their discredit and had vaguely wished to meet one. But something in form or movement of this object--something in the awkwardness of its approach--told him that it was not a bear, and curiosity was stayed by fear. He stood still and as it came slowly on gained courage every moment, for he saw that at least it

> had not the long, menacing ears of the rabbit. Possibly his impressionable mind was half conscious of something familiar in its shambling, awkward gait. Before it had approached near enough to resolve his doubts he saw that it was followed by another and another. To right and to left were many more; the whole open space about him was alive with them--all moving toward the brook.
>
> They were men. The crept upon their hands and knees. They used their hands only, dragging their legs. They used their knees only, their arms hanging idle at their sides. They strove to rise to their feet, but fell prone in the attempt. They did nothing naturally, and nothing alike, save only to advance foot by foot in the same direction. Singly, in pairs and in little groups, they came on through the gloom, some halting now and again while others crept slowly past them, then resuming their movement. They came by dozens and by hundreds; as far on either hand as one could see into the deepening gloom they extended and the black wood behind them appeared to be inexhaustible. The very ground seemed in motion toward the creek. Occasionally one who had paused did not again go on, but lay motionless. He was dead. Some, pausing, made strange gestures with their hands, erected their arms and lowered them again, clasped their heads; spread their palms upward, as men are sometimes seen to do in public prayer.
>
> Not all of this did the child note; it is what would have been noted by an elder observer; he saw little but that these were men, yet crept like babes. Being men, they were not terrible, though unfamiliarly clad. He moved among them freely, going from one to another and peering into their faces with childish curiosity. All their faces were singularly white and many were streaked and gouted with red. Something in this--something too, perhaps, in their grotesque attitudes and movements--reminded him of the painted clown whom he had seen last summer in the circus, and he laughed as he watched them. But on and ever on they crept, these maimed and bleeding men, as heedless as he of the dramatic contrast between his laughter and their own ghastly gravity. To him it was a merry spectacle. He had seen his father's Negroes creep upon their hands and knees for this amusement--had ridden them so, "making believe" they were horses. He now approached one of these crawling figures from behind and with an agile movement mounted it astride. The man sank upon his breast, recovered, flung the small boy fiercely to the ground as an unbroken colt might have done, then turned upon him a face that lacked a lower jaw--from the upper teeth to the throat was a great red gap fringed with hanging shreds of flesh and splinters of bone. . . .

This story was written about twenty years after the second quotation. Again, the main impression we get is one of substantial improvement. It is not merely clever, it is powerful; it is not written to amuse, but to carry a stark and sincere vision of the nature of war; it is, in other words, art with the force of personal truth behind it.

Bierce remained in San Francisco for eight years after the publication of *Soldiers and Civilians*, then moved to Washington in January, 1900, after which time his work was syndicated in Hearst's eastern papers and appeared less often in the *Examiner*. His son Leigh, a New York journalist, died of pneumonia in that city on March 31, 1901; three years later Bierce's wife, from whom he had long been separated, died in Los Angeles; he was survived by a daughter, Helen. During his first five years in Washington, his work, called "The Passing Show," was carried by various Hearst papers. Then it appeared in *The Cosmopolitan*, a Hearst magazine, until Bierce retired from journalism in 1909.

He passed his last years traveling and visiting friends, reconnoitering Civil War battlegrounds and trying to recapture the emotions of fifty years earlier. He became increasingly morose. In early 1913 he began planning a journey to South America via revolutionary Mexico. He probably neither expected nor wished to return from this trip, and he didn't. It is likely that he was killed during the siege of Ojinaga in early January, 1914.[12]

He left behind a vast amount of writing, the worst of which is either unknown or ignored, and the best of which establishes him, I think, as the most profoundly witty western American author of his generation, the most mordant and powerful satirist, the subtlest and most effective stylist, and, together with Mark Twain, the most readable today. His worst work has puzzled and pained those who know it, and his best work has intrigued and delighted a growing number of readers for over a century. Both his worst writing and his best pose the question (implicit in the three preceding quotations and the reason for their inclusion): How are we to account for the changes in skill perceptible in these writings? Or, more precisely, what are the particular causes and sources of Bierce's growing effectiveness? This is the question to which I address myself here, in an attempt to explain and document this growth from ineptitude to power. My essay is an inquiry into how a farmboy/doughboy came to write several volumes of permanently valuable prose--the previously mentioned *Soldiers and Civilians*, for example, and *Fantastic Fables, The Devil's Dictionary*, and his "Epigrams."

The answer to this question lies in Bierce's style. Since the matter of his writing remained fairly constant, it is to the manner that we must look for clues to this growth. The improvements are stylistic ones.

"Style" means, for the purposes of my argument, technique--primarily rhetorical technique. And "rhetoric" means what it meant to Aristotle: "The faculty of discovering the possible means of persuasion in reference to any subject whatsoever" (*Rhetoric* I,2), and what it means to Wimsatt and Brooks: "a study of how words work."[13]

The two main terms associated with rhetoric are "trope" and "figure." Although rhetoricians disagree as to where the line between them should be drawn, they agree that one should be drawn somewhere. In his review of these words' definitions, Richard Lanham ranges from Cicero and Quintilian to Morris W. Croll.[14] Finding little consensus, he can only generalize. A trope, he concludes, changes the meaning of a word or words, rather than arranging them in a pattern of some sort, while figure pertains more to the placement of words than to their meaning. But word position must affect meaning, if only very slightly, and thus a rhetorical figure will always contain elements of trope.

This need not invalidate the distinction if we realize that "trope" and "figure" are not discrete terms but rather approximate positions on a continuum, observable tendencies toward semantics on the one hand and syntactics on the other.

That is the sense in which I will be using these words. The value of the distinction, and the reason for preserving it despite its inconclusiveness, is that it allows us to use--with reservations but with some confidence--terms that reflect real rhetorical differences. Without the distinction we are reduced to speaking only of "rhetorical devices" and thus scanting real differences between pattern/ornament/form and meaning/essence/content. In the rhetoric of such writers as Bierce this difference is discernible and important.

In this essay the difference is particularly important because I think it is the key to Bierce's style, and because I will be contending throughout that his stylistic growth consists in, and can be measured by, his use of these two devices. To put it more precisely: Bierce the neophyte relied heavily on the facile manipulation of easy tropes (bad puns, for example, and sarcasm), but he gradually mastered the use of tropes by subordinating them to logic and to increasingly complex figures.

To put it more succinctly: Bierce's writing gets better as, and because, it moves along this continuum from trope to figure.

The actual process was not, of course, so simple, and the following pages refine and elaborate on this general, central idea. One such elaboration should be made here: although logic and rhetorical figures are by no means equivalent, I have joined them on the side of the continuum opposite trope. I have done so because of their similar functions; both logic and figures organize meaning and help make it more distinct, rather than being the primary vehicles of that meaning. The emphasis of both is on pattern.

By joining the two I do not mean to minimize the importance of logic. It is integral. "As both a logical and an organizing device," write Professors Hughes and Duhamel, "the syllogism is of great value, capable of dealing with the most substantial argument, and capable also of providing a structure for the most graceful lyric."[15] So it is with Bierce. In his best writing there is nearly always some sort of implicit syllogistic framework (often far below the surface) within which the piece is closely bounded, and about which, in conjunction with the rhetorical figures, Bierce is enabled to weave the bright threads of his excellent wit.

"Wit," writes Matthew Hodgart, "is the effect of perceiving an idea or event, simultaneously or in quick alternation, in two habitually incompatible frames of reference . . . the event is bisociated."[16] Wit, the essence of satire, "rests on the ability to discover and reveal the power hidden in language [by] ingenious compression, a sudden revelation of hidden complications, and the linking of two incongruous ideas" (p. 111). Hodgart's definition fits Bierce's brand of wit nicely. Consider, as just one example, a Bierce aphorism: "Self-denial is indulgence of a propensity to forego."[17] The salient points of wit are there: a simultaneous perception of two incompatible ideas, compression, and a revelation of complications which links these two ideas.

I will be using "wit," the term, in this way, understanding it to mean a quality of mind manifested in writing which puts an ironic pressure on the language, by means of artful ordering and juxtaposition, for the purpose or with the result of making it reveal latent semantic possibilities. The effect is not necessarily funny. While humor may thrive upon simple incongruity, wit depends upon incongruity that is pointed and multifaceted. "To be comic is merely to be playful," Bierce observed, "but wit is a serious matter. To laugh at it is to confess that you do not understand."[18] And again: "Wit stabs, begs pardon--and turns the weapon in the wound. Humor is a sweet wine, wit a dry; we know which is preferred by the connoisseur."[19] Here is an example of wit turned against humor and in the process developing a superior humor of its own:

> HUMORIST, *n*. A plague that would have softened down the hoar austerity of Pharaoh's heart and persuaded him to dismiss Israel with his best wishes, cat-quick.
>
> Lo! the poor humorist, whose tortured mind
> Sees jokes in crowds, though still to gloom inclined--
> Whose simple appetite, untaught to stray,
> His brains, renewed by night, consumes by day.
> He thinks, admitted to an equal sty,
> A graceful hog would bear his company.
> *Alexander Poke.*[20]

Bierce was a wit, but he was a wit second and a satirist first. That is, his wit was nearly always intended to wound, and his wit developed from the discipline this intention imposed. If wit is the essence of satire, satire is the mother of wit, since it sets the goal, points the way, and, by virtue of its forms and patterns, often suggests the method. The quotation above is an illustration. By appropriating Pope's framework Bierce was able to, among other things, clinch his point by merely changing four key words in the closing lines: "sky" to "sty," "faithful" to "graceful," "dog" to "hog," and "him" to "his." In this way the satire in large part influences the wit by orienting it to the point being made.

Satire has been variously explained and defined--by reference to its origins and emphases, the etymology of the word, the intention of the satirist, and by the methods, attributes, and devices associated with the form.[21] For Bierce, however, "satire" meant "punishment." "I find [he writes] in Folly and in Vice a lack / Of head to strike, and for the lash no back."[22] Again, in "To a Censor" (who advocates smiting the offense but sparing the offender), "To fire at random if you still prefer, / And swear at Dog but never kick a cur," he is voicing the same notion.[23]

Here is an extended exposition of his views (from the 9 November 1872 edition of the *News-Letter*):

> Satire should not be like a saw, but a sword; it should cut, not mangle.--*Exchange*. O, certainly; it should be "delicate". Every man of correct literary taste will tell you it should be "delicate"; and so will every scoundrel who fears it. If there is one main quality in satire to which everything should be subordinate--which should be kept constantly in view as solely worthy of achieving, it is "delicacy"--that is, obscurity--that is, ineffectiveness. Your satire, my young reader, should not mangle; our contemporary has *told* you it should not mangle. He has not explained why a thing that is a legitimate object of satire--that is, a thing that is bad and worthy of extermination--ought not to be mangled; but it is doubtless true that it ought not. It ought only to be made to slightly wince--"delicately". A man who is exposed to satire must not be made unhappy--O dear, no! He must find it very good reading--a little pungent and peculiar, but on the whole invigorating and breezy. Don't mangle him. If he is a thief, don't call him so by name, but insinuate darkly--and "delicately"--that "possibly some gentleman to whose outward seeming his own aspect conforms, might justly be suspected of confusion in his conception of *meum* and *tuum*." Don't mangle the man, like that coarse Juvenal, and that horrid Swift, but touch him up neatly, like Horace or a modern magazinist.
>
> Then, in faith, you shall be in fashion, and every critic shall glow--"delicately"--with admiration of your niceness and polish; and your victim shall give your censures into the hands of his young daughter to read to him, that he may be free to writhe. It was not long ago that the *Atlantic* gravely praised somebody's satire, because it was "so subtle as to leave a half doubt of its intent"! What a jackass-taste is this. Gad! If Miss Nancy is going to "sentence letters" much longer, there will be little tatting made. Let us mangle!

David Worcester, in his *The Art of Satire*, observes that "the spectrum-analysis of satire runs from the red of invective at one end to the violet of the most delicate irony at the other" (p. 16). I have ventured to quote Bierce at such length for three reasons: to enable the reader to place for himself Bierce's early satire on Worcester's spectrum (well away from the delicate violet side, one would think); to show how far his satire is from complaint, the grave Christian reproof in which the sin, but not the sinner, is condemned; and to provide an example of the subject under discussion--a little satiric attack which may, for the present, stand as a definition of itself.

As it happens, Bierce already had a modicum of delicacy--or at least subtlety--when this attack was written, and would acquire considerably more. His best later efforts combine clear intent and sophisticated presentation that made them more effective than anything he wrote before his stay in London. Although "satire" and "punishment" remained equivalent for Bierce, he soon realized that the punishment should fit, and should not distract attention from, the crime. I will hold him to his definition of satire in the pages that follow, noting those instances, in which self-indulgence or inattention or spleen supplant craft and thus mollify punishment, as lapses from his own standard.

Worcester's spectrum may be superimposed on my trope/figure continuum without unduly blurring either. By viewing these constructs in the same light, one can see them as being in some ways equivalent. The man who calls his opponents "swine," for example, is indulging in invective, is putting all his bad disputational eggs in one flimsy rhetorical basket, a simple-minded use of the trope metaphor. On the other end of the scale one would find such a passage as Bierce's

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The point is that the syntactic arrangement is at once more "delicate"--that is, subtle and artful--and more effective than the candid invective epithet. So that, other things being equal, as the satire moves from reliance on tropes and invective to reliance on figures and irony, the writing will become more, not less, powerful. And so, if Bierce's satiric course were to be charted along Worcester's spectrum, one would find flashes of invective red throughout with, latterly, streaks of delicacy violet becoming more frequent as the dominant color changes from bile yellow to glacier blue.

Four species of satire should, since Bierce used them all, be noted and, as far as possible, distinguished from one another. They are parody, travesty, burlesque, and lampoon. In common usage these overlap so much as to be synonymous; in technical writing, too, there is confusion between them and there probably always will be. However, for the purposes of this study, I see no harm in sharpening the terms somewhat. Following the lead of Thrall, Hibbard, and Holman, then, I will take parody to mean the satiric treatment of a writer's style, travesty the satiric treatment of a text, burlesque such treatment of a literary or subliterary form or tradition, and lampoon the satiric treatment of an individual or group.[24] These can be and often are combined, but one is usually predominant. That is, a prime victim does not preclude ancillary ones. For an example, we may refer once more to Bierce's definition of humorist. His subject is the tribe of jokesters, and the definition is, therefore, chiefly a lampoon. But traces of the three other variants are present as well: the piece is also and incidentally a parody of Pope, a travesty of his *Essay on Man*, and a burlesque use of the heroic couplet.

Here, for variety's sake, is another definition from *The Devil's Dictionary*. It too illustrates the four satiric variants as I have defined them; it is principally a lampoon of W. J. Bryan, but is also a parody of Longfellow, a travesty of *Hiawatha*, and a burlesque of the Kalevala epic form:

> WHANGDEPOOTENAWAH. *n*. In the Ojibwa tongue, disaster; an unexpected affliction that strikes hard.
>
> Should you ask me whence this laughter,
> Whence this audible big-smiling,
> With its labial extension,
> With its maxillar distortion
> And its diaphragmic rhythmus
> Like the billowing of ocean,
> Like the shaking of a carpet,
> I should answer, I should tell you:
> From the great deeps of the spirit,
> From the unplummeted abysmus

Of the soul this laughter welleth
As the fountain, the gug-guggle,
Like the river from the cañon,
To entoken and give warning
That my present mood is sunny.
Should you ask me further question--
Why the great deeps of the spirit,
Why the unplummeted abysmus
Of the soul extrudes this laughter,
This audible big-smiling,
I should answer, I should tell you
With a white heart, tumpitumpy,
With a true tongue, honest Injun:
William Bryan, he has Caught It,
Caught the Whangdepootenawah!

Is't the sandhill crane, the shankank,
Standing in the marsh, the kneedeep,
Standing silent in the kneedeep
With his wing-tips crossed behind him
And his neck close-reefed before him,
With his bill, his william buried
In the down upon his bosom,
With his head retracted inly,
While his shoulders overlook it?
Does the sandhill crane, the shankank,
Shiver grayly in the north wind,
Wishing he had died when little,
As the sparrow, the chipchip does?
No 'tis not the shankank standing,
Standing in the gray and dismal
Marsh, the gray and dismal kneedeep,
No, 'tis peerless William Bryan
Realizing that he's Caught It,
Caught the Whangdepootenawah!

The first of these, and the fourth, quickly became and remained Bierce mainstays. This is all to the good because burlesque and lampoon are more central to satire than travesty and parody, since the former two cast a wider net. Travesty, for example, concerns one text, and is relatively easy to do (as evidence, one could cite the extreme facility with which schoolboys convert innocuous tunes to bawdry). The form depends heavily upon the simple substitution of key words in the original text. Parody is more difficult, since it requires the ability to extract salient points from, usually, a number of texts in order to approximate a style. Burlesque is relatively more difficult still, since the writer must sift a number of styles for the essence of a form. Further, the first two variants are largely self-defeating when not paired with burlesque or lampoon: if the text or style is worthless, then the travesty or parody will be largely wasted ink; if the text or style is eminent, then the travesty or parody will likely be either carping or oblique homage--feeble satire either way. (For example, how many still read Max Beerbohm's brilliant collection of parodies, *A Christmas Garland?*) Lampoon and burlesque are not self-defeating because they imply a larger pertinence--lampoon because it is ethical, dealing directly with the vice or folly of individuals and groups, and burlesque because it concerns how these groups write and think.

So the movement from travesty to parody to burlesque and lampoon represents a general movement from the easy to the difficult, from the particular to the general, and from the incidental and peripheral to the essential and important. The movement is away from simple word-manipulation, then, and toward an art sufficiently complex to reflect with some fidelity, and therefore be in a position to criticize, the real world. The point is that this is the same general drift perceptible in Bierce's stylistic growth, from semantics to syntax. We might reasonably expect, then, to find more travesties and parodies as ends in themselves in his earliest writing, and more burlesque and lampoon later on. That is what we do find, if we discount the travesties and parodies which are incidental (as in the two definitions just quoted) or subordinated to some larger purpose.[25] I know of only a half dozen freestanding, post-1875 Bierce parodies, and not one such travesty.

Similarly, Bierce's use of the terse, pithy utterances called, indifferently, "epigram" and "aphorism" (most people don't distinguish between the two) shows the same basic tendency[26]--from the particular to the general. This tendency constitutes the difference between the two forms: an epigram has a particular, an aphorism a general application.[27] Thus, for example, Bierce's rather pointed remark that William Jennings Bryan's creation was "the unstudied act of his own larynx" is an epigram, because it applies only to W. J. Bryan and alludes to one event, Bryan's "Cross of Gold" speech.[28] This speech (a resounding iteration of the Populist party line) and the events that followed it may have sparked this broader Biercean observation, "The only distinction that democracies reward is a high degree of conformity"[29]--a remark tending toward aphorism.

These two, epigram and aphorism, are, like travesty, parody, and burlesque, distillates of a narrower or wider range of observation. Thus there are pithy remarks centring on this continuum which could be taken as either epigram or aphorism. An aphorism, however, tends to furnish its own context, as do burlesque and lampoon; an epigram, like travesty and parody, requires a context (an introduction, the reader's special knowledge) for its proper appreciation. A good test, or method of differentiation, is to ask how well the epigram can stand on its own. If it cannot, then that is what it is; if it can, then it is an aphorism, since the more general it is the likelier that its subject is common knowledge.

The reason for the distinction here is the difference between two kinds of Biercean bon mot: his satiric attacks tend to be epigrammatic, his later essays aphoristic. The epigram, the terse recapitulation of the attack which is its context, may, since the logical and syntatic patterns are supplied by that context, rely heavily or solely on the meaning-bearing devices that I am calling tropes--puns, for example. The aphorism, however, is, as Matthew Hodgart puts it, the "condensation of moral satire."[30] As such, it cannot be simply an elliptic restatement of its context, but rather an embodiment of it. To do this, it must provide its own syntactic patterns for the purpose of organizing, sharpening, and shortening the meaning contained. In the last quotation, for instance, Bierce brackets the aphorism with its antithetical key terms, "distinction" and "conformity." This arrangement lends these words added weight, since the beginning and end of a sentence are the usual places of greatest emphasis. Thus the aphorism's central contradiction is reinforced syntactically.

Bierce's style, the wit which it displays, and the satire in which this wit is displayed move from a reliance on tropes to an exploitation of tropes by subordination to figures. That, at least, is my contention. One might, then, expect his serious aphorisms, since they tend to be of a later date and to rely less upon tropes than his epigrams, to be an improvement on those epigrams. They aren't, however, and here the general scheme needs qualification. The Bircean aphorism was probably more difficult to write than the other, and has, since it is more universal, aged better. But that does not make it better in any real sense. The test of any literary device is whether or not it effectively fulfills an author's purpose. Bierce's epigrams and aphorisms both do so, and therefore neither is better than the other. The difference between the two, then, is one of degree and scope, not kind, and of application, not effectiveness or purpose.

The purpose and overall effect of the epigram, aphorism, and the rest of Bierce's stylistic devices, is concision. According to Herbert Spencer, "in composition the chief, if not the sole thing to be done, is, to reduce this friction [of language to thought, though a necessary instrument of it] . . . to the smallest possible amount. Let us then inquire whether economy of the recipient's attention is not the secret of effect."[31] Such an economy is the main secret of Bierce's effects, the reason behind much of his syntactic experimentation. It is his distinguishing stylistic trait.

By "concision" I do not mean shortness. Most of Bierce's earliest squibs are very short, but they exert no pressure on the language because nothing is left unstated, only the easiest rhetorical devices are used, and few of the words bear more than their workaday denotative meanings. Such early pieces though short, are too long, because they say very little, and that little, badly. Seen this way, they are the opposite of the later succinct Biercean line of equal length--the line, pared to the bone, that conveys a great deal.

These concise lines often contain, and depend upon for their effect, difficult tropes artfully ordered. Here, for example, are two instances of Biercean synecdoche; an aphorism: "Woman would be more charming if one could fall into her arms without falling into her hands"[32]; an excerpt from his definition of slang: "The speech of one who utters with his tongue that which he thinks with his ear."[33] Here again, in both these examples, the final word is the most important one. Arms and hands are alive with connotations, and their juxtaposition lends these connotations pertinence. Also, the trope *ploce*, repetition of a word or words with an altered meaning in succeeding phrases ("fall into her," "falling into her"), helps emphasize the basic contrast: the words mean the same thing until one reaches the second object of the preposition at the end of the sentence. Then idiom takes over and converts the repeated phrases to antonyms: "conquest" and "surrender." In the second instance of synecdoche, nothing comes between the ear and the tongue, this absence of brain being Bierce's point.

Ernest Hemingway's dictum that the good writer must first of all know what may be omitted applies with double force to the epigrammatist: he must know, not only what to leave out but what to omit from the page yet retain, through his audience's proper inference, in the reading of that page. The application of this knowledge is concision: a few words in a nimbus of implication. Bierce wished to say more and more in less and less space and, over the years, he often succeeded brilliantly. As Wilson Follett rightly observed, "there was no stage that could content him short of absolute reduction to lowest terms."[34] Mary Grenander concurs: "Bierce's style is stark and stripped, without excess verbiage but freighted with vast implications."[35]

I think Bierce's style has not received the attention it deserves--hence this essay, the scope of which is the first eighteen years of his journalism, from late 1868 until early 1887. The subject matter is his columns, "The Town Crier" in the *News-Letter*, and, later *Figaro*; and "Prattle" in the *Argonaut*, the *Wasp*, and the *Examiner*.

Since his disappearance, there has been considerable critical comment on Bierce's writing, but very little of it deals with his journalism, and still less bears directly on his style. Harry Sheller comes closest. His excellent dissertation (1945) focuses on Bierce's satire through the lens of his newspaper work, and provides a catalog of those whom Bierce attacked, the forms these attacks took (dream visions, utopian chronicles), some of the devices used (irony, implication, comparison, reduction, etc.), and the various possible origins, literary and otherwise, of Bierce's satire. His interest is both broader and narrower than mine--broader, because he is less concerned with the minute workings of particular words, the bedrock of stylistic inquiry, and narrower, because style subsumes satire. My essay is a closer look, then, which may (if successful) be used to get a more comprehensive view of all Bierce's writing. Although we several times use the same illustrative passages (because typically Biercean) our concerns are different: I am interested in an underlying principle of a style; Dr. Sheller, in the characteristics of Bierce's satire.

Cathy Davidson's recent (1974) dissertation, "The Poetics of Perception: A Semantic Analysis of the Short Fiction of Ambrose Bierce," is not yet available. I have read one chapter, however; and it suggests that the complete essay will prove Bierce to have been as alive to meaning and nuance as I believe he was. Wilson Follet's "Ambrose Bierce: An Analysis of the Perverse Wit that Shaped His Work" is a short but intriguing article written in 1928, detailing several astute impressions of Biercean wit and of the forms it often took. Finally, Carey McWilliams' life of Bierce, first published in 1929, is still easily the best biography and contains some perceptive comments on his subject's literary style. McWilliam's book prompted this study. It did so by raising for me the question previously posed: How did Bierce do it?--and another, more to the point: How can we view, systematically, Bierce's prose style, the most interesting aspect of a very interesting man?

The best place to begin looking for an answer is in his journalism. First, these weekly columns constitute a sufficiently large body of work (660 pages of newsprint) from which to draw conclusions. But though the amount of writing is considerable, the individual items are brief enough to be quoted in full and thus studied entire. Mr. Follett asserts that Bierce "would himself have been willing, I am sure from a hundred clues in his work, to accept his own manipulation of the English sentence--its weight and wit and thrust and employment of words--as the final measure of his individuality and of his claim to permanent recognition"(p. 288). If Follett is right, and I think he is, then a careful look at these individual sentences--how they are constructed and linked together--would be both a mark of courtesy to Bierce and the logical way to glean insights into his developing style.

The second advantage in using "The Town Crier" and "Prattle" is continuity. Development implies chronology, and the columns (since they were preponderantly topical and would thus have been written no more than a week or two before publication) furnish that chronology with their dates. The columns also provide the opportunity for controlling another variable, subject matter: some of Bierce's interests were fleeting, but not his concern with the clergy. I have used passages on parsons throughout the study because Bierce wrote them throughout his career, and because these little-known pieces contain some of his best and worst writing.

I have selected twelve passages for extended analysis, two from the same year. This is a tiny fraction of Bierce's first eighteen years' work: one passage averaging approximately 1/15 of a weekly column, a column 1/50 of any year's total, and not quite 2/3 of the years to 1887 represented--roughly one-thousandth of the Town Crying and Prattling done in this period. Further, "The Town Crier" and "Prattle" do not constitute his only output. Other pieces carry his by-line; others, unsigned, are obviously (to me) written by him; also, there are doubtless quantities of free-lance work (done for other papers than his six principal ones) which exist but will never again see daylight. There are his books and letters. In short, Bierce seems to have kept pen to paper for forty years with remarkable diligence.

One might object, then, that twelve passages would seem unlikely to shed much light on such an enormous whole, or such a huge body of work bear much relation to such a seemingly negligible part. Deliberately taking the part for the whole and the whole for the part is a fallacy of ambiguity, *secundum quid.* I have sought to avoid this blunder by reading the available Bierceana and culling from the columns illustrative excerpts which this reading has shown to be representative as well. I have sought to lessen the force of the objection by including as much additional Bierce material as I thought practicable, thus giving the reader grounds for his own conclusions, and by testing my conclusions against Bierce's best known and most widely available work, "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge."

These other quotations, then, besides illustrating points made in technical discussions (and, perhaps, leavening those discussions somewhat), also provide a bit of context. This context, hopefully a slight boon to the reader, should for this reason benefit Bierce: as John Middleton Murry observed, "the test of a true idiosyncrasy of style is that we should feel it to be necessary and inevitable; in it we should be able to catch an immediate reference back to a whole mode of feeling that is consistent with itself."[36] Stripped of its context, an excerpt from a relatively unknown body of work occasions no echoes and is thus less likely to seem valuable than a comparable excerpt from a more familiar corpus. Pertinent snippets of Bierceana, then, warrant their own inclusion by providing Bierce with a second and better apologist, himself, and should therefore help justify this study of his way with words.

## NOTES

[1] University of Virginia Library (Clifton Waller Barret Collection) MS. 5992-A. The passage is headed, "Steamer Sacramento, Pacific Ocean," and dated "Sept. 13th, 1865."

[2] The bulk of the biographical information in this section is from Carey McWilliams' *Ambrose Bierce* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1967), and from Mary E. Grenander's *Ambrose Bierce* (New York: Twayne, 1971).

[3] Four lines will give the essence of it:

With what anguish of mind I remember my childhood,
Recalled in the light of a knowledge since gained;
The malarious farm, the wet, fungus-grown wildwood,
The chills then contracted that since have remained.
(Quoted from McWilliams, p. 26)

[4] Strangely, this gentleman's qualities and accomplishments, when listed, read like a catalog of his nephew's aversions: the General was religious, he relished secret societies and fraternal orders (going so far as to found a few of his own), he was a brigadier in the Ohio Militia, he belonged to a temperance society, and he never let slip the opportunity to make a speech laden with the weight of baroque metaphor then in vogue. See his *Travels in the Southland, 1822-1823*, ed. George W. Knepper (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1966), pp. 11, 14, 22.

[5] Grenander, p. 30. "When [she continues] one remembers the notebook passage describing his trip to Panama, sprinkled with misspelled words, grammatical errors, and mistakes in punctuation, one realizes the magnitude of his chore. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
A comparison of his 1865 journal with his mature works is a startling revelation of how thoroughly he implemented, in his own training, the theories he eventually propounded."

[6] "Ambrose Bierce's Concern with Mind and Man," Diss. Penn. 1962, p. 13.

[7] Grenander, p. 31.

[8] *San Francisco's Literary Frontier* (New York: Knopf, 1939), p. 242.

[9] "Notes: Written with Invisible Ink by a Phantom American," *Nuggets and Dust* (London: Chatto and Windus, [1873]), pp. 57-59.

[10] Berkove, p. 14.

[11] *The Collected Works of Ambrose Bierce*, 12 vols. (New York: Neale, 1909), II, 49-52. Cited hereafter as *Works*.

[12] McWilliams, p. 325. See also his "The Mystery of Ambrose Bierce," *American Mercury*, 22 (March 1931), 330-37.

[13] *Literary Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1957), pp. 68, 58. The translation of Aristotle's definition is Wimsatt and Brooks's.

[14] *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1969), pp. 101-03.

[15] *Principles of Rhetoric* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962), p. 127.

[16] *Satire* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969), p. 112.

[17] "Epigrams," *Works*, VIII, 378.

[18] Ibid., p. 346.

[19] "The Opinionator," *Works*, X, 101.

[20] *The Devil's Dictionary*, *Works*, VII.

[21] See Robert C. Elliott's *The Power of Satire* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1960), *passim*; John Peter's *Complaint and Satire in Early English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), pp. 9-13; Raymond MacDonald Alden's *The Rise of Formal Satire in England under the Classical Influence* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1961), p. 38; James Sutherland's *English Satire* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1958), pp. 4-5; John Middleton Murry's *The Problem of Style* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1922), p. 59; and Gilbert Highet's *The Anatomy of Satire* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1962), p. 18.

[22] *Black Beetles in Amber*, *Works*, V, 249.

[23] *Shapes of Clay*, *Works*, IV, 112.

[24] *A Handbook to Literature*, rev. and enl. ed. (New York: Odyssey Press, 1960) pp. 66-67.

[25] This is one of Bierce's better early parodies (*News-Letter*, 8 July 1871); it could stand on its own as a fair burlesque of nationalistic oratorical cant:

> Following is the opening spasm of the oration delivered at the Mechanic's Pavilion last Tuesday: "*Fellow Citizens and American Eagles*--when Freedom from her mountain hight [ sic ] unfurled the *Mayflower*, the despotism of tottering Europe hid their diminished heads under a bushel of chaff. Then the bright arch of Liberty spanned the wondering nations with civil and religious toleration, and the Palladium of our proud nationality spread her wide wings in the blaze of free republican institutions. There never was--no, fellow citizens, there never will be--I say it without the fear of successful contradiction, and unabashed before the despotisms of effete Europe--there never will be, fellow citizens--never, I swear it, never, never! Let us, oh! patriotic Eagles--let us soar sloft into the blue empyrean of universal emancipation, and swear we will

never sheath the sword until the blessings of civil and religious liberty shall--fellow citizens--shall--yes, *shall* totter to their fall. And that is what is the matter with Hannah, fellow citizens--that is what is the matter with Hannah!" At this unexpected burst of his own eloquence, Judge Sawyer's emotion mastered him, and he stood rigidly upon his head. The stars on a neighboring banner winked mysteriously, the stripes curled into a distracting snarl, and a wooden eagle in the audience snapped his beak solemnly, and laid a candy egg. Some instruments belonging to a band stretched out straight and yawned hideously. Our reporter impelled a dead cat at random, and was kicked out. Hooray!

[26] Neither did Bierce distinguish between them. He defined both, ironically, in *The Devil's Dictionary* (*Works*, VII) and used the terms interchangeably.

[27] For discussions and definitions of these terms, see W. H. Auden's *The Faber Book of Aphorisms* (London: Faber, 1962), p. vii; Northrop Frye's *The Well-Tempered Critic* (Bloomington, Ind.: Univ. of Indiana Press, 1963), p. 89; and Matthew Hodgart, op. cit., pp. 150, 160.

[28] *Examiner*, 19 July 1896.

[29] "Epigrams," *Works*, VIII, 358.

[30] Hodgart, p. 160.

[31] "Economy," *Representative Essays on the Theory of Style*, ed. William Tenney Brewster (New York: Macmillan, 1905), p. 170.

[32] "Epigrams," *Works*, VIII, 377.

[33] *The Devil's Dictionary*, *Works*, VII.

[34] "Ambrose Bierce: An Analysis of the Perverse Wit that Shaped His Work," *Bookman*, 68 (November 1928), 286.

[35] Grenander, p. 79.

[36] Murry, p. 14.

# CHAPTER ONE: THE *NEWS-LETTER*

## 1. FUMBLING

One of the first bits of print definitely ascribable to Bierce is headed "Interior Items" and appears in the 10 October 1868 issue of the *News-Letter*.[1] It purports to be excerpts from frontier newspapers, and is conceived and written in a genre already long established, the western tall tale:[2]

> A little bit of romance has just transpired to relieve the monotony of our metropolitan life. Old Sam Choggins, whom the editor of this paper has so often publicly thrashed, has returned from Mud Springs with a young wife. He is said to be very fond of her, and the way he came to get her was this: Some time ago we courted her, but finding she was on the make, threw her off, after shooting her brother and two cousins. She vowed revenge, and promised to marry any man who would horsewhip us. This Sam agreed to undertake, and she married him on that promise. We shall call on Sam tomorrow with our new shot-gun, and present our congratulations in the usual form.

This is credited to the *Hangtown "Gibbet"*; other items follow from the *Dog Ranche "Weakly Howl,"* the *Siskiyou "Knock-Down,"* the *Red Head "Stars and Bars,"* the *Nigger Hill "Patriot,"* and the *Frog Spring "Herald."*

The effect--such as it is--of this sketch and the others depends on hyperbolic violence, the convention being that bucolic types are brutal and therefore funny. It is similar to the first apprentice piece attributed to Twain, "The Dandy Frightening the Squatter," in that both rely heavily on what may be called stimulus-response humor: a stereotypical figure of fun is made to behave characteristically and the result is necessarily humorous. Thus Twain's dandy discloses his cowardice, as does Bierce's rural editor his murderousness, and a laugh is assumed to follow.

Once, in answer to a British critic who objected that all American humorists were the same, an older Bierce explained that they were not the same, that they were easily differentiated into two schools, the "dad-gum" and the "dod-gast," and that the distinguishing expletives also constituted the humor--failure to understand this meant missing the whole point of American humor.[3] But here, at the start of his career, he is consistently guilty of the same lapse he was later to criticize so sharply and often: predictable humor. But "predictable humor" is largely a contradiction in terms since what is funny is usually unexpected or incongruous, so it is probably better to call it quasi-humor.

This sort of thing is the comic equivalent of a logical blunder, begging the question; its weakness is that it assumes what must be demonstrated:

Rubes are funny.
This story concerns rubes.
This story is funny.

That is, inferior or quasi-humor derives more from manipulation of orthodox props (mothers-in-law, ethnic foibles, traveling salesmen) than from invention. To the extent, then, that Bierce falls back on such mechanical funning, his work becomes mediocre.

Bierce used the tall-tale form, with increasing skill, over twenty times in his years on the *News-Letter*. These were "The Town Crier's" set-pieces, and were usually the longest items in that column. As Bierce ran out of topics and ideas his columns dwindled to a series of obstrusively sarcastic one-line jibes. The last quarter of his column tended to be a series of flatfooted rejoinders and bitterly dismal puns:

> The editor of the Sacramento *Union* says our "rings" must be overthrown by new men of more liberal and enlarged views. How, then, does *he* expect to do it.
>
> The *Times* has an article headed "Useless Destruction of Property." We did not read it, but suppose it refers to the waste of ink by the editor's pen.
>
> There is a company of some kind in the city calling themselves California Tigers. Such ridiculous pretension merits nothing but *stripes*.[4]

Such stichomythic perfunctoriness suggests nothing so much as a young journalist working against an imminent deadline.

This is the pattern, then, of Bierce's first two years as the "Town Crier": three or four painstakingly written and relatively long paragraphs followed by increasingly short ones until the page is filled. He was, at this point, several years from being able to fill his entire column with a well-proportioned and wittily telling essay, or with several hundred lines of verse. Just how far the young Bierce was willing to go in retrieving an incipient pun from deserved oblivion may be seen in these examples:

> On Wednesday last a lot of creditors were bilked out of four thousand dollars by the filing of a petition in bankruptcy by one Isaac Ripperdam. Why, if even a female debtor should serve us so, we'd Ripperdam scalp off![5]

> On last Sunday John Doughty preached about the Widow's Mite. The widows *might* have been edified by the sermon, but they were not, nor was anybody else.[6]

> Why would Dr. Ayer be a good officer in the Branch Mint? We do not know, but an Ass-Ayer is quite essential to that establishment.[7]

The last quotation also gives a faint intimation of another early Bierce predilection, name-calling. This device, a candid hurling of the invective epithet, is a technique that I earlier called a simple-minded use of the trope metaphor. Often, an entire attack would consist in likening his subject to one or more of the traditionally unpleasant beasts, and, often, the occasion for the attack (his subject's supposed lapses in morality or reason) is not mentioned. It may have been such a paragraph as this one which led Dr. Grenander to brand Bierce's early style "hyperbolic, ironic bombast":

> The vacant-headed simpleton who has for some months misconducted a dramatic paper in this city, has been so persistently kicked by gentlemen across whose path he has had the temerity to crawl, that he has finally been compelled to purchase the luxury of sitting down without pain, by disposing of his interest. This ridiculous incarnation of inspissated idiocy, who, by a miraculous manifestation of morbid meanness in Mother Nature, was thrust upon a protesting world as a faultless specimen of the human hog, was a decent printer until his mirror suggested the aspiring monkey, which he straightway attempted to emulate in ambition as in face. His brief but brilliant career affords another illustration of the folly of attempting the *role* of a gentleman with the brain of a jackass. If it be not already clear that we allude to George T. Russell, we despair of describing a dunce by any ordinary method of delicate insinuation.[8]

It will be noticed that the animal kingdom has been rifled for a suitable array of epithets to be used against Mr. Russell, that, sandwiched between these is an earnest string of alliteration (presumably included to lend the passage fire), and that, painstakingly wrought as the paragraph obviously is, it is by no means apparent what Mr. Russell did to merit such opprobrium.

It is only fair to note, however, that Bierce was aware of this technique's limitations even as he was transgressing them. He mocks his own bombastic name-calling in the 30 July 1870 issue of the *News-Letter:*

> A liberal reward will be paid at this office to anyone who shall invent a suitably vituperative epithet to be applied to Dr. John T. McLean, the Treasury mouser of this city. Our own head blackguard has labored with so unflagging a zeal in the pursuit of the proper word, has expended the midnight oil with so lavish and matchless a prodigality, has kneaded his brain with such a singular forgetfulness of self--that he has gone clean daft. And all without adequate result! From the profoundest deep of his teeming invention he succeeded in evolving only such utterly unsatisfying results as "rhinoceros," "polypus," and "sheep-tick" in the animal kingdom, and "rhubarb," "snakeroot," and "smartweed" in the vegetable. The mineral world was ransacked, and gave forth only "old red sandstone," which is tolerably severe, but had been previously used to stigmatize a member of the Academy of Natural Sciences. Now, what we wish to secure is a word that shall contain within itself all the essential principles of downright abuse; the mere pronouncing of which upon the public street would subject one to the inconvenience of being rent asunder by an infuriated populace--something so atrociously apt and so exquisitely diabolical that any person to whom it should be applied would go right away out and kick himself to death with a jackass. . . .

Another shortcoming, related to name-calling, is his tendency to lapse into clumsy abuse. Versifiers, for example, irritated him almost from the first. But Bierce, although his instinct prompted him to distrust occasional poets, at this time knew no more about prosody than they, and was therefore obliged to proceed via billingsgate: "We do really think our local metropolitan muse distinguished herself on the occasion of last Monday's festivities. We suggest for Mr. W. H. Rhodes and Mr. Charles De Lacy a pig-skin diploma, each, and their promotion to commanderships in the Ancient and Honorable Order of Unutterable Idiots."[9] The lame awkwardness of this squib is made even more obvious when contrasted with a few deft little critiques written during the second decade of his vendetta against local poets. Such reviews as the ones following would today be called hatchet jobs, but the term "needle job" would be more appropriate; he effortlessly skewered hundreds of rhymesters through the weakest spot of each, exhibiting them, like beetles on a board, to his readers:

> Grateful--and very properly so--for my notice of her poetry last week, Mrs. Maria Brentle, of Alameda, "the Sublime Liberty Singer," sends me some detached and independent verses which she intelligently calls "epigragms." Here is the first, which is on Liberty:
>
> "Oh, Liberty, how little the blood-glutted
>   Tyrants who sway the skepter
> Think when from their dynasties they're butted,
>   That it's owing to our war of independence."
>
> Mrs. Brentle, it will be observed with delight, sometimes makes use of the dainty poetic device of rhyming the first and third line of a quatrain, instead of the second and fourth. The effect is peculiar--nothing else will give it.[10]
>
> A lady living on the other side of the Bay directs my attention to the songsmith of the *Pacific Rural Press*, who cruelly conceals his identity behind the initials "J. M." This superior poet (whom I suspect to be John Milton) recently spun out seventeen stanzas of a "Legend of Orizaba," in one of which occurs this immortal quatrain:
>
> "Then I spoke in tones emphatic--
>   Long in wonder did he stare,
> Doubting not a strange lunatic
>   Had escaped his master's care."
>
> If "J. M." were not so great a poet that the light of his minor merits pales in the blaze of his capital renown, he would win imperishable honor in the field of pronunciation. . . .[11]
>
> Mrs. Azalia E. Osgood . . . begins some noble stanzas in the *Examiner* with this touching sentiment:
>
> "Urged by no financial crisis in the world's tumultuous mart,
> It sometimes seems almost foolish to take matters so to heart.
>
> "Foolish?" It is straight-out idiotic, Azalia. Why, for example, should I, though urged by no financial crisis that I know about in any tumultuous mart that I ever heard of, be depressed utterly . . . because you write reasonless rhyme and verses destitute of all sweet validities and hard, salt sense? What is it to me, child,

> that without greater natural aptitude or superior special training than is implied in a black beetle's guidance of his tumbling orb downhill you undertake the highest and most difficult intellectual function? Why should I not be as tranquilly unconcerned as you?--spread out there in the mud where Pegassus [ sic ] flung you, and meekly poulticing your place where it hurts you with the medicated reflection that
>
> "To fret is useless when fair means have been employed
> To accomplish certain objects and we find our efforts void."
>
> I am unable to take so cheerful a view of your failure, Azalia, for I am acquainted with the nature of the female local poet. She is a kind of lady Antaeus, who the harder she is thrown rises the more refreshed and resolute--more hopeful, more industrious, more conceited, viler, with a worse ear and a more disobedient no voice.[12]
>
> Col. Jackson, of the *Post*, has imported a poet, one Col. Richard Realf, "whose already achieved and honorable reputation," says the consignee, "entitles him to a hearty welcome in this state." Turning to his work--"a charming poem," Col. Jackson says--my eyes light upon these two lines:
>
> "In the concert halls, where the lyric air
> In palpitant billows swims and swoons."
>
> It is enough; I welcome the warrior-critic's warrior-poet to a seat among the local bards. Make room there, you vagabonds. Mah'ny, shtop twirlin' that shillaly; ye'll be hittin' the gintleman's nose. Dam, *you* Dam, uncross your legs, sir, this minute; and you, Captain Stuart, stop inflating, and turn your edge to the front. There, Colonel, squeeze in--somewhere. No kissing Theresa.[13]

In passing, it may be worth noting that the nine-word admonition to Stuart is an instance of Bierce's antic but apt wit. It would be difficult to brand an individual--and, by metonymy, his poetry--as insubstantial more briefly and deftly than Bierce has done here. Stuart is not only a child among children, but a sort of hubris-ridden cardboard child, dimensionless, who all but disappears under direct scrutiny. This depiction is not only deft but very apt; here is Mr. Stuart, *en revanche:*

> "If Mr. Bierce is as courageous
> Physically as he professes
> To be scribically he can have
> A chance to make that fact apparent."
>
> The daintiness of the . . . meter is like the measured tinkle of a cow-bell in the gloaming, but it must not lull the understanding to imperception of more sterling merits--such, for example, as the author's formidable device (in the metrically no less perfect lines following) for conveying, by use of plurals, the disgusting impression that there are more than one of him:
>
> "We are certainly his peers,
> If not superiors,
> In position, intellect,
> And financial standing;
> He can therefore have no palli-
> Ation on either of these grounds."[14]

Col. Realf's effusion, and those of Mrs. Brentlé, "J.M.," Mrs. Osgood, and Mr. Stuart, are typical. They are five small eruptions, part of what Franklin Walker calls San Francisco's mid-century "rash of poetry," a term which fitly describes a phenomenon both irritating and mildly pathological.[15] These five were included, with their glosses, to illustrate both what Bierce was obliged to contend with and his later method for doing so.

This concision and deftness did not develop overnight, however. Occasionally, during his first year on the *News-Letter*, he descended below the level of vulgar abuse to that of the inarticulate jeer:

> An elevated metaphor: "The garden pink of Manhattan kisses the field poppy of Yerba Buena."--*Bulletin*. Yah, yah! We swim in a sea of Manhattan pinks. O brave *Bulletin!*[16]
>
> The Executive Committee of the Caucasian Society is ordered to prepare an address to the people of the United States. We have prepared an address to the Executive Committee of the Caucasian Society, which runs thus: Go home--you ridiculous political vermin. What in thunder do you suppose the people of the United States care for you?--you obsolete ethnologic pre-Adamites--you absurd fossils of a moral paleozoic vacuity--you wretched remnants of an intellectual anachronism--you limp cobwebs, dangling in the musty obscurity of a dense political ignorance! You Caucasian Society! Cau-casian! Caw![17]

The attack on George Russell had at least the redeeming feature of self-mockery, but there is very little of that in these last two quotations. Furthermore, nowhere in the bewildering welter of names and sounds in the second one is there a hint of the Society's nature--which was very unsavory. This group advocated forcibly excluding the Chinese from the Californian economic community, thus forcing them to leave or die. That is, the group wished to legalize an activity that had been indulged in for some time: the murder of Chinamen by those with whom they competed. But the reader is told none of this and can only assume that the Caucasian Society (if he has no other knowledge of it) is probably either good or bad, depending on his estimate of the Town Crier. This passage is to satire what epilepsy is to combat: despite the frenzy it never closes with the intended victim. Happily, such outbursts are infrequent and shortly disappear from Bierce's writing.

From this brief look at Bierce's early efforts to be funny, witty, and satiric, it should be apparent that serious flaws--pedestrian exposition, formulaic humor, contrived punning, crude sarcasm and abuse, unimaginative and irrelevant name-calling--mar his performance. The development of his style was largely a process of correcting these failings by discovering techniques (such as the one noted earlier, used against the local poets) which required more precision and restraint. As I stated before, the evolution of such techniques resulted in a shift of emphasis from isolated component to overall pattern. That is, Bierce came to use words and groups of words in such a way that they were not only interesting in themselves but directly pertinent to their contexts.

> Rev. H. W. Nelson, rector of Hartford Episcopal Church, informed his congregation last Sunday that any member who attended the *Grand Duchess* or *Blue Beard* operas would be refused communion for six months, and Bishop Williams sustains him.--*Exchange*. 1 (Paying the above penalty will not excuse the offenders from paying pew rent during suspension, nor from putting money into the plate on Sunday. 2 The rector and the bishop have to attend the proscribed performances, just to see that their orders are observed by the congregation; *they* don't go to see anything else, *oh, no!**

This was written on December 12, the day Bierce became editor of the *News-Letter*, and is, as we have seen, typical of his approach to journalism in these first months. The most obvious weakness stems from his choice of structure, simple direct and indirect quotation and rejoinder. This tit-for-tat method is the opposite of (though it may be good practice for) a true epigrammatic or aphoristic style, since it relies on the accidental rather than the essential. Earlier I made the point that epigram and aphorism depend for their effect upon wit plus a grain of either particular or general truth. Bierce's first squibs are ephemeral, then, because they address themselves to a trivial subject in a superficial manner. That is, an isolated remark by anyone can be made to sound foolish, but the effort to make it seem so is hardly criticism and the result is hardly good journalism.

Later, when he was less likely to run out of ideas than space, his comments were usually much more terse. For example, about the once great but moribund *Punch* he simply remarked that, "The applause that follows a joke in *Punch* is the tribute that Recollection pays to Intention."[18] Or again, in an attack on the rewriting of history by

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*The lines of this quotation and those of the eleven key ones following are numbered to facilitate reference to particular sentences.

"the sleek Philistine, the smug patriot, and the lessoning moraler," he remarked that, "You can no more love and revere the memory of the biographical George Washington than you can an isosceles triangle or a cubic foot of interstellar space."[19]

Finally, these two curt and candid observations on Mr. Hayes suggest that the President had both too much and too little substance to suit Bierce:

> . . . Mr. Hayes is become disagreeably fat. Comparing his pictures of today with those of three years ago one is unpleasantly conscious of a change that is not for the better. He was not then pretty; he is now repulsive. He had then an expression of distinguished insignificance; he has now none at all. . . .[20]
>
> There was enough of Lincoln to kill, and enough of Grant to kick; but Hayes is only a magic-lantern image without even a surface to be displayed upon; the screen upon which he was temporarily projected and defined in order to be voted for has been withdrawn. You can not see him, you can not feel; but you know that he extends in lessening opacity all the way from the dark side of John Sherman to the confines of space. . . .[21]

These last four are true epigrams because they are concise, because they pressure the language into conveying more than it otherwise would. The first one gets its compressive power from personification. The two nouns best suited to convey the contrast between past eminence and present ineptitude are capitalized and left to resonate in the mind of the reader: senile Intention earnestly filling his page with jokes, aged Recollection reading the page as a palimpsest upon which only the erasures are legible.

The second and fourth epigrams use *catachresis*, extravagant metaphor, to good effect. What could be more perfect and less human than an equilateral vacuum? Or what could depend more upon an audience for its existence than an image on a screen--what better way to tell Americans, "the President is all in your mind?" The third epigram's impact derives from the figure *isocolon*, repetition of phrases or clauses of equal length and corresponding structure. Within this parallel arrangement, litotes ("not . . . pretty") is played off against hyperbole ("repulsive") in the penultimate sentence, and in the last sentence oxymoron ("distinguished insignificance") is played off against a second hyperbole, a particularly ingenious one, which almost seems an understatement until implication has its full effect: "he has now none at all." And implication is allowed its full effect in the last six words because these monosyllables receive approximately equal stress (they constitute, that is, three spondees), and because the six monosyllables incorporate two subordinate figures, alliteration and near-assonance: both words in the first spondee begin with an h, both in the second begin with an n, both in the third with an a. Hayes may lack expression but Bierce has plenty.

It takes effort to arrange and balance one's sentences; personification, metaphor, litotes, and hyperbole are, well used, more difficult tropes than facile irony and flaccid punning. But, as here, the difficulty is recompensed by effectiveness. A test of that effectiveness is that these epigrams defy paraphrase. Bierce is in control of his thought and materials here, not manipulating (or being manipulated by) easy tropes within the grasp of the most ham-handed. As a result, he makes his point, and makes it briefly, forcibly, and uniquely.

But there is little of that pithy incisiveness in the beginning. Instead there are straw men, vertical in the first half of the squib, horizontal in the second. It is as though Bierce, caught up in a game of verbal tennis with San Francisco and the nation, nearly always confused returning an easy serve with scoring a point.

Neither does Bierce's diction contribute much to these exchanges. His stock of words is still small at this point compared with the varied and formidable vocabulary he was to acquire--although "proscribed" (in sentence two of the squib in question) suggests that he had got hold of a dictionary and was using it. Lacking variety at this time, his vocabulary did not allow him much stylistic flexibility. He hadn't yet the phraseology of the classes and professions at his finger-tips; consequently, when he dealt with these groups he was unable to color his writings with the appropriate jargon. (He was shortly, as we shall see, to become a master mimic.) His strange, latinate neologisms belong to the future also, and his successful ventures into slang and dialect.

In the dictional narrowness of this present excerpt there is little to suggest Bierce's future rhetorical skill. He uses only two tropes here, the first perhaps unintentionally. *Ploce*, repetition of a word with a new meaning after an intervening word or words, appears in the first sentence: "Paying . . . paying." If Bierce wrote this deliberately, it is difficult to see why. The difference between abridgment of privilege and cash outlay might be significant in some contexts, making or reinforcing some point; but here, if there is a point, it is obscure since the main thrust is at the supposed hypocrisy of the two clergymen.

The second (and, for satire, basic) trope, irony, is used in a particularly broad and obtrusive way. Carey McWilliams is no doubt right in saying that the audience of the time was obtuse, that any humor "must not only provoke a smile: it must drum the risibilities of the callous until they burst into guffaws."[22] And the publications of the day suggest that the national demand for sophisticated wit was not great, but this sort of obviousness was a cut below an admittedly mediocre level.

Restricting himself as he did, for the most part, to such short squibs, Bierce was unable to take advantage of the stylistic possibilities that syntax has to offer. A more artful ordering could, by means of alternation, variation, and repetition, have reinforced what Bierce wished to say. Such an ordering, too, could have changed what he wished to say for the better, by suggesting new similarities and distinctions. This is so because arrangement implies category, and category implies relationship.

Such a hypothetical expans~~ion~~, in turn, having yielded a few new conclusions and being leavened with these, might then be distilled to an epigram shorter than the original squib. The movement would then be: easy trope, pattern, truncated pattern with more difficult trope; or, looked at in a slightly different way: shortness, elaboration, concision.

As an illustration of this hypothetical process here are three successive references to Darwin. The first two were published in the *News-Letter*, on 2 January and 21 August 1869, respectively; the third appears in *The Fiend's Delight* (1873), p. 167.

> A lecturer on the Gorilla and his relations to man, recently illustrated the fundamental differences of structure. The report says: "He dwelt at considerable length on this point, and in such a manner as to make it evident that he was no believer in the hypothesis of Darwin." By his dwelling upon it at all he made it quite evident that he knew nothing about the "hypothesis of Darwin," and nine-tenths of the lecturers are in exactly the same condition. They nearly all take it for granted that Mr. Darwin believes Man to be derived from the Monkey. Not even the most casual observer would ever imagine *them* to be "derived"; and the editors who print their stupid stuff are in the same original state. We do not refer to him of the *Alta*. O no!

The sarcastic and callow rejoinder contains the germ of this much better one:

> The editor of the *Barnacle* has a hobby which he has ridden for a number of years, to the perfect satisfaction of his readers and the unspeakable delight of ourselves. That hobby--now somewhat sore in the back--is the Darwinian theory. How much the rider knows about his horse will be seen from the following, upon the freedom of thought: "One man is not to be deterred from advocating the Darwinian theory because his neighbor is shocked at the idea that man is a development of the monkey." Very true, but he ought to be debarred from advocating it if he shocks his neighbor at his utter ignorance of what it really is. The Darwinian theory, James, does *not* imply that man is "a development of the monkey," but that both are descended from a common parent. See the difference? Your error is the same as if you should claim to be the offspring of a mule, instead of admitting that the ass is the father of both the mule and yourself. In the one case you would assert a physical impossibility, in the other you would simply support an extremely probable hypothesis.

The equine conceit represents--besides a clear name-calling gain--the emergence of technique. And technique, according to Mark Schorer, "is the means by which the writer's experience, which is his subject matter, compels him to attend to it."[23] My suggestion is that Bierce was attending to his subject matter in this second passage, that form and content are here working to their mutual advantage. This (as evidence) is the thought in its final form: "Those who are horrified at Mr. Darwin's theory, may comfort themselves with the assurance that, if we are descended from the ape, we have not descended so far as to preclude all hope of return."[24]

The movement from the diffuse to the pointed is a function of substituting, in passage two, "descended," for "derived" in passage one. This fertile pun ("descent": "lineage" and "degeneration"), enables Bierce to capitalize on the anti-Darwinians' misconception, instead of merely deriding it. In one sentence--not six, as in the original version--Bierce stands the anti-Darwinians on their heads: his epigram counters their implicit premise, that man is the crown of creation, by reversing the direction of the "development." To the stigma of having disreputable ancestry is added that of being degraded progeny.

My point is that, in this hypothetical schema, the control required in the handling of the conceit pattern would also tend to obviate the heavy irony of the first passage while yielding the clue to an even better form for this particular content. The easy trope, sarcasm, yields to a pattern, which in turn yields a more difficult trope, in this case, *paronomasia*. This movement, or at least the second and third stages of it, is perceptible in Bierce's best paragraphs. It is a drift from testiness to effectiveness.

His worst squibs, however (to return to the one heading this section), are not amenable to this process of syntactic and semantic tirkering because there is nothing to tinker with. There is some matter in Bierce's first reply to the anti-Darwinians, but there is none in his rejoinder to Rev. Nelson and Bishop Williams, and the little piece is totally ephemeral.

> 1 We have received--from the publishers doubtless--a thanksgiving sermon by Dr. Wadsworth. 2 It is handsomely bound, in pamphlet form, with green covers, and presents a really attractive appearance. 3 It is precisely ten inches in length by five and a half in width, and is said to contain nineteen pages. 4 We have seldom seen a neater specimen of typography than is presented by the exterior of this pamphlet, and would advise the parsons to get all their sermons done at the same establishment.

This second example of Bierce's early technique, published two weeks after the first, varies slightly from ~~it.~~ The second is also brief, also consists of a simple introduction and comment, but the comment is slightly longer and its conclusion is implicit in that which precedes it.

The diction has improved, contributing significantly to the piece. The use of the faintly pejorative 'parsons," instead of "clergy," suggests some increased awareness on Bierce's part of the subtleties of language. This is a mild example of *tapinosis*, a favorite Biercean trope, the use of undignified language that debases a person or thing. It is appropriate here because it leaves no doubt about the irony of the foregoing praise.

The passage is in form an ironic *encomium*. The most frequently employed trope is *effiguration*, the elaborate description of an object or event--in this case, of an object. We are apprised of its form, color, and dimensions. But since the object is a book, these data are all secondary; except in descriptive bibliography, books are evaluated in terms of content, not appearance--no matter how "really attractive" that might be. So this use of *effiguration* grades into *systrophe*, the heaping up of descriptions of a thing without defining it, since any true description of a book will to some extent be a definition as well. This being so, the whole passage becomes an instance of *paralepsis*, emphasis by pointed omission. And the proper inference is that, while one can't judge a book by its cover, one can, in the case of bound sermons, judge the cover only since that is likely the best part.

Harry Sheller has observed that "nothing is so difficult in a study of the satire of Ambrose Bierce as to identify and classify the devices by which the author achieved his satiric effects. The devices are sometimes so elusive, so varied in application, and so intermingled with one another that they defy classification."[25] Even the very brief selection just considered suggests the justice of this remark. True, there is a tendency for the functions of rhetorical devices to overlap, but this tendency does not fully explain the strange and protean manner in which Biercean devices exchange their identities, by which the effects of one constitute another, and so forth.

Dr. Sheller has identified the difficulties involved in anatomizing Bierce's rhetoric, and in doing so provides a good reason for proceeding in this direction despite the problems entailed: a uniquely varied and elusive system of techniques, and the style that comprises and results from this system, could hardly fail to be interesting--if, that is, it can be understood. A careful rhetorical analysis should help.

The syntax in this second passage shows a perceptible improvement over that of the first. For example, the key word "appearance," falls in the middle of the paragraph in the key slot of the second sentence--at the end, thus receiving maximum emphasis. Also, it is worth noticing Bierce's use of the figure *anaphora*, the studied repetition of words and phrases that induces parallelism, which can in turn lend a passage a deliberate tone. The two middle sentences are bracketed by the opening and closing ones, each of which begins with the seemingly judicious "We have," using the editorial first person plural. The two intervening sentences are instances of the figure *isocolon* (seen earlier, in the first Hayes epigram). Both are compound declaratives, and each begins its first independent clause with "it is," and its second with the coordinating conjunction "and." In this way the proportions of the paragraph are balanced, making it a fitting vehicle for its content, seemingly reasoned approbation arrived at after careful scrutiny and consideration.

Also, in the third sentence, the identical positioning of the two predicates near the fronts of their respective independent clauses serves to point up the disparity of these predicates: "is precisely" is definite but irrelevant; "is said to contain" is indefinite but refers by implication to an aspect of book reviewing that is quite relevant.

Finally, since parallel structuring implies the repetition of patterns and of words within these patterns, such structuring allows for the elision of some of these elements, because understood from similar previous ones, and therefore to some extent redundant. Thus, "it" is deleted from the second clause of the second sentence, "inches" from the first clause of the third, and "we" from the second of the last. This is the figure *ellipsis*, and, keeping Herbert Spencer's dictum on the desirability of the fewest words with the most meaning in mind, its use here can be seen as a gain--though in this case a tiny one --since the number of words is reduced but the sense left intact. Bierce also managed to exclude the pronouns from the relative clause "[that which] is presented by the exterior" in the first independent clause of the last sentence--although he could as well have written "than the exterior" and saved another three words.

For the moment it is enough to note that by the end of 1868 he had made some progress in the choice and placement of words and in the arrangement of clauses and sentences. He had begun to sense the advantages of marshalling various elements of prose--paragraph, sentence, clause, phrase--and of disposing them so as to complement and emphasize the meaning they conveyed. And he had come to realize somewhat the possibilities inherent in other modes of expression than spontaneous bumptiousness, and the potential effectiveness of understatement.

The germ of Bierce's Darwinian epigram can be found in his studied reply to the editor of the *Barnacle*; similarly, in the patterns of the non-book review just considered one may catch a glimmer of another epigram, a very terse dismissal of literary unworth: "The covers of this book are too far apart."[26]

## 3. 1869

> 1 The *Town Crier* Family, male, female, and young, attended church on last Sunday as a treat to the children. 2 The male listened with decent gravity and much interest to the prayer of the eloquent divine in the pulpit, and was seized with a desire to imitate or even surpass it if possible. 3 Returning home full of his subject he seized a quill, and lo! the subjoined: "O, Lord, who for the purposes of this supplication we will assume to have created the heavens and the earth before man created thee; and who, let us say, art from everlasting to everlasting; we beseech thee to turn thy attention this way and behold a set of the most abandoned scallawags thou hast ever had the pleasure of setting eyes on. 4 We frankly admit, O Lord, that we are but worms wriggling in the sand hills South of Market Street and elsewhere. 5 In addition to this we confess ourselves a sweet lot of smoothe-tongued hypocrites, with a goodly sprinkling of healthy sneaks, and insist that our villainy is something phenomenal, and that we are capable of any inexpensive enormity. 6 Not one of us has the hardihood to claim a single redeeming virtue. 7 We were born so, and can't help it; and wouldn't if we could. 8 But in consideration of the fact that thou sentest thy only-begotten Son among us, and afforded us the felicity of murdering him, we would respectfully suggest the propriety of taking into heaven such of us as pay our church dues, and giving us an eternity of exalted laziness and absolutely inconceivable fun. 9 We ask this in the name of thy Son whom we strung up as above stated. Amen."

In this passage, published on September 11, Bierce exhibits an increasing mastery of diction. From the second independent clause of the third sentence the passage is, in form, a burlesque prayer. It opens with the customary *apostrophe*, then immediately degenerates into a snarl of colloquialisms and proviso-tangled legalisms, to which we will return shortly.

The fourth sentence begins with the trope *parrhesia*, a frank admission--in this case, the traditional Christian protestation of unworthiness. The next sentence continues this and quickly turns it into its opposite, an expression (implicit in the first protestation) of near-boundless pride in evil. Bierce effects this transformation by the increasing hyperbole of his key nouns (worms, hypocrites, sneaks, phenomenal villainy, enormity), and by a sequence of judiciously chosen verbs (admit, confess, insist). "Confess" implies less reluctance than "admit," and, of course, "insist" implies none at all. So the *parrhesia* becomes a boast; and the boast, in turn, becomes another, not of sinfulness but of meanness: the adjective "inexpensive" at the end of the fifth sentence turns the preceding climax of iniquity into an anticlimax, by virtue of its incongruity with the word it modifies.

This quick reversal is an example of what was soon to develop into a characteristic Biercean stylistic technique: the momentary and at times nearly imperceptible deviation from the goal toward which his diction, and syntax and logic are moving in otherwise good order. This can be disconcerting. But when such reversals are well done they cause the reader to stumble from a clearly marked path, so to speak, onto a less well defined shortcut. It is a creative stumble, then, by which the nimble reader is apprised of the divergence between Bierce's ironic intent and his real one.

For example, in the 18 September 1887 *Examiner*, Bierce seems to be in the midst of a straightforward essay on the advantages of small size to soldiers; he is really preparing another small salvo in his running battle with the California Militia: "Gravitation is inexorable, and nature does not confer strength in proportion to the weight of its chain. If a horse had the relative strength of an ant, a ton would be a light load, and General Dimond in full uniform would not distress his charger. A flea as large, and proportionately as strong, as a kangaroo could clear at a leap the whole distance between the breast of an enemy and the back of Colonel Sonntag. . . ."

The same technique is apparent in this aphorism: "Pray do not despise your delinquent debtor; his default is no proof of poverty."[27] The irony cuts two ways and both parties are deftly taken to task. The last word makes it clear that the defaulting *and* the despising proceed from improper motives--a wry comment on Gilded Age values. This tendency is evident throughout Bierce's journalism, after about 1870. Here is another example, from the 27 September 1884 edition of the *Wasp*; he is in the middle of a tirade against an unsavory political clergyman named Cogswell, better known as Halleluja Cox: "This resounding vulgarian, whose advocacy of religious living once made sin so respectable that he was uneasy in its practice . . ." Here the technique's value is even more apparent than in the militia excerpt or in the aphorism: Cox, through the reversal, is seen less as a hypocrite than as an incarnation of Hypocrisy.

To take a final instance from the burlesque prayer under discussion: in the second half of the third sentence, the prepositional phrase "before man created thee" is a similar change; it is an expression of atheism in an otherwise ironically consistent expression of egoistic agnosticism. These inconsistencies are not always successful, as this one is not. Because it seems to have no function beyond rounding out the first relative clause, it is a gratuitous intrusion, and the passage would be better off without it.

Wilson Follett has noticed this Biercean trait. It took, according to Mr. Follett, the form of a "new rhetoric," one which "dealt out his meaning in a shape which one might call the zigzag: a formula which asserts, which denies, and then which denies the denial--all three operations in one verbal gesture, the stylistic counterpart of Bierce's disposition to ridicule everything, even his own ridicule. . . . When, in this mode, he is working at his best, nearly every sentence is a point and a preparation."[28] The zigzag analogy is apt, because it describes a process by which Bierce, without breaking stride, takes a hitch in his thought and moves on. Later, as we have seen, this perverse but often ingenious spontaneity became a foil to his craftsmanlike terseness and exactness, a frequent reminder that behind the well-chosen and well-ordered words lurked an antic and fecund wit. The less serious he considered his subject to be, the more freedom he allowed his sense of humor, letting it play a light mocking counterpoint to his main theme.

The essence of the wit displayed by these reversals seems to result from a fruitful convergence of denotation (objective, linear progression along lines of meaning) and connotation (subjective and oblique movement along lines of association). The precise and logical wording serves as a foil to the spontaneity; the spontaneity deflects the logic toward what it has indicated is the real goal: there is a click of ivory and the moving ball is dropped in an unlikely pocket. Soldiers of whatever size must, to merit the name, be physically and psychologically able to see combat--that is the real point of the militia excerpt, and the wit helps make that point. There is bisociation, as Hodgart suggests, and that is wit in the mind of the writer; there is also juxtaposition, or collision, and that is wit on the page.

The key passage displays another interesting sort of juxtaposition, one less conjectural and more perceptible. *Mimesis*, mimicry of speech, is the master trope here. Slang and legal-commercial jargon alternate throughout with the archaic diction usually considered appropriate to worship, thus reinforcing the prayer's tone of vulgar opportunism. *Tapinosis*, seen earlier, contributes to this tone. "Laziness," for example, and "fun" in the eighth sentence are low terms for the traditional "ease" and "bliss." In his last sentence Bierce juxtaposes these three types of diction for maximum effect: "in the name of thy Son [archaism] whom we strung up [colloquialism] as above stated [legalism]."

Specialized diction needs more of the same, for camouflage. Standard diction has its context provided by the reader, but jargon out of context must fend for itself and usually, because it is jargon, cannot do so.[29] It perishes in the language's larger setting because in that setting it is readily seen to be unnecessary, or pretentious, or absurd, or even vicious and therefore dangerous to the language and those who speak it. Language is hostile to sub-languages, and the mother tongue is slow to acknowledge bastards. Interspersing antagonistic jargons, as Bierce does here, heightens the effect: the legal, colloquial, and archaic phrases are not just strange creatures cast ashore out of the murk, but enemies who fight when they get there. Weaknesses are not only exposed, as they would be by normal language, but exploited.

Such telescoped burlesques represent a discernible stylistic improvement. Not only are they concise, but they illustrate Bierce's growing awareness that his victim's own words often furnish the best proof of culpability.[30]

This last sentence, since its diction implies Bierce's objections, constitutes, as does the seventh, an instance of *anacephalaeosis*, a quick summary. In the seventh sentence this trope has the effect of putting a period to the list of faults that preceded it: "We were born so, and can't help it; and wouldn't if we could." In the final sentence the use of this trope makes pointed the summary of both the passage's first part (the basis for the claim) and its second (the claim itself). *Anacephalaeosis* is a characteristic Biercean device; we will see it used to good effect in succeeding sections also. This trope, and *mimesis* and *tapinosis*, reinforce Bierce's logic and, what comes to the same thing, help make unmistakable the prayer's illogic: the claim to salvation based on qualifications for damnation. This passage, then, is in effect an attempted *reductio ad absurdum* of Calvinistic covenant theology. (One of Bierce's later satiric definitions catches the *reductio's* essence: "ADORE, *v.t.* To venerate expectantly.")[31]

The syntax, too, complements the sense throughout. For example, the third sentence is a run-on sentence. That is, grammatically it should be two sentences instead of a single long compound-complex one, since there is a shift, after the word "quill," from indicative to imperative mood. But this solecism is appropriate because it helps convey the intended sense of haste.

Similarly, the structure of sentences five, six, and seven helps end the first part of the burlesque on a note of finality. Sentence five is long and compound-complex, and because it is constitutes the figure *continuatio*, a long, full sentence; sentence six is short and simple, making it an instance of the figure *brevitas*. This latter serves as a capsule restatement of what has gone before (i.e., no virtue). Its abrupt repetition of the point being made contrasts with the lengthiness of the one preceding, and thus helps underscore that point. Finally, sentence seven, the *anacephalaeosis*, clinches the point.

This trope gets much of its effectiveness from two tributary figures. The first, *ellipsis*, permits the compression in the three increasingly terse independent clauses by removing the subject from the second one, and both subject and predicate from the third. The second figure is *auxesis*, words or clauses arranged in climactic order: thus "were born . . . can't help . . . wouldn't" concludes this part of the prayer, echoes the earlier and less obvious "admit . . . confess . . . insist" climax, prefigures the tripartite jargoning at the close, and renders the start of the eighth sentence totally incongruous and therefore absurd, since at this point there can *be* no "buts."

Taken together, sentences five, six, and seven provide an example of the increasingly complex ways in which Bierce's figures and tropes interact, of the way in which figures are beginning to order tropes both from without and within. That is, sentence configurations such as the alternation of *continuatio* with *brevitas* (five and six) provide an introduction for, and thus emphasize, the trope *anacephalaeosis* in sentence seven; the figures *ellipsis* and *auxesis*, contained in this trope, shorten and order it and thus make it still more emphatic. The influence of arrangement on sense is evident elsewhere: the climax and the reversal in sentence five take point from each other; juxtaposing the three jargons heightens the incongruity and puts a resounding period to the passage. Finally, the whole prayer is ordered with an eye to the *reductio* it comprises. This passage, it need hardly be pointed out, is not ordinary newspaper writing--and Bierce had only been a journalist for one year.

## 4. 1870

1 Sunday evenings at Dashaway Hall are now devoted to the discussion of the alleged divinity of Christ; and the disbelievers, who seem to have a monopoly of the talent and wit, are making it very merry for the orthodox, it must be confessed. 2 But we do not despair of beating them yet. 3 The trouble is, our champions of the divinity consent to conduct the discussion upon the narrow grounds of human reason, and do not seem to make an intelligent use of the sword of Faith. 4 Now faith, in the language of the Scriptures, is the evidence of things absurd--or words to that effect. 5 It is not belief in things reasonable, for that is judgment, but in things unreasonable. 6 It is belief not only without evidence but against evidence. 7 In short, it is belief without any grounds of belief; and in neglecting to use it in this question our friends virtually surrender to the enemy. 8 One of these blasphemers openly claimed, at the last meeting, that Christ was illegitimate by birth. 9 O, monstrous dolt! do not two of the Evangelists give his complete pedigree, from David down through Joseph, his adopted father? 10 Do not these two genealogists perfectly agree in the truth that he *did* descend from David, and only differ as to the number and names of the intervening ancestors? 11 Are not Matthew and Luke to be implicitly believed in those things in which they disagree as well as in those in which they are of one mind? 12 Because Joseph married Mary *after* she had conceived, does that prove that Christ was no blood relation of Joseph, and therefore not of David? 13 To argue thus is to argue as if you were dealing with the facts of to-day instead of the mysteries of antiquity. 14 But, pshaw! it is sufficient answer to these irreverent slanderers to point out that, even rejecting faith, our reason and experience tell us that bastards are not born of virgins, and Christ was born of a virgin. 15 True, the same reason and experience tell us that *no* child is born of a virgin, but by faith we *know* that miracles were wrought of old, and this is one of them. 16 Anyhow, where even the wisest of us cannot comprehend, the dullest of us may at least revere. 17 We have a profound contempt for infidels, Unitarians and all blasphemers who dare strike at our religious belief. 18 If we could work our own sweet will upon them they should all be stewed.

This fourth passage, published on December 31, after Bierce had edited the *News-Letter* for two years, illustrates among other things his ability to speak through a mask: "but we do not despair of beating them yet"--in the second sentence "Bierce" announces his ironic identity and proceeds to demolish his own position.

We have seen Bierce use the persona in an earlier section: by briefly putting on the pedagogue's mantle he figuratively reduced the local poetasters to a set of fractious school children. He used this technique throughout his career, and seems to have relished, especially at the outset, the roles of Village Atheist, Resident Ghoul, and *Arbiter Elegantiae* of Suicide.[32]

The persona may, of course, enable the author to distance himself somewhat from his work. Also, in satire the persona may be, besides the vehicle of satire, one more satiric object. If the persona has this double function, that is, if he damns himself and his fellows out of his own mouth, then the satire will depend upon contradictions, inconsistencies, and other internal blunders. If there is little external pressure on the utterances of such personae (as opposed, for example, to the King of Brobdingnag's crushing rejoinder to Gulliver), and if these utterances occupy little space (as opposed to the cumulatively very funny section in book nine of the *Iliad* in which Nestor, having offered to treat the wounded Machaon, treats him instead to an autobiography)--if there is little pressure and little room, then, the persona's discourse must be seen to fall, quickly, of its own weight.

Bierce accomplishes this here through his persona's attempt to discredit reason by faith. This attempt boomerangs, and the champion of a denatured faith sprawls through a number of increasingly discreditable irrationalities, finishing very lame. Everybody knows the arguments which inform the piece, but Bierce manages to give these chestnuts some new savor.

Sentences four, five, six, and the first half of the seventh form an *enthymeme*, a rhetorical syllogism, which functions as a *distinctio*, a careful definition of terms, which in turn tends to invalidate faith as a tool of controversy. This being done, faith is ironically invoked.

Sentences nine, ten, and eleven form a second *enthymeme*, a fallacious one, which functions as an *apomnemonysis*, an appeal to authority--in this case, that of the gospels. But, since it is ironic, it is a disguised version of *apophasis*, affirmation by seeming denial (of the alleged illegitimacy). The *enthymeme* results in a dilemma requiring belief in contradictories.

Sentence twelve is an *argumentum ad ignorantiam*, the false argument which requires that the truth of a proposition be acknowledged because its falsity has not been established (i.e., no one has proven that Joseph and Mary were not simply guilty of fornication). "Bierce" rejects such arguments out of hand ("To argue thus . . ."; this is the trope *apodioxis*, the indignant rejection of an argument as being wicked or absurdly false) and embarks on a series of question-beggings in sentences 13, 14, and 15. These are instances of *petitio principii*, since the mysteries and miracles of antiquity and the virgin birth cannot be assumed true and used as proof of the divinity of Christ, because these things are contingent upon the divinity and require proof as well. Finally, in sentence 17 "Bierce" again rejects the attacks on Christianity as being wicked, and the circular reasonings have come full circle, back to "O, monstrous dolt!"

This, then, is the logical machinery that trips up the fundamentalist persona, and it works smoothly and unobtrusively enough--lubricated by skillful choice and placement of words--to make it appear that he is falling over his own feet.

In the previous passage, the burlesque prayer, we noticed Bierce's method of clinching a point, or seeming to do so, with the use of parallel construction induced by *anaphora*, each repetition bearing more emphasis than the last and the whole thus forming a climax ("We . . . [we] . . . [we]"). At the end of the sentence the tensions and expectations, more or less consciously felt by the reader, which have been elicited by the emphatic repetition, are resolved at the same time as the tensions and ambiguities generated by the sentence's underlying sense, held in suspension to the end, are resolved. The reasoning may be only plausible, but reasoning and rhetoric well synchronized seem to have a synergistic effect on each other, producing a small cerebral and visceral satisfaction and with this an involuntary assent at certain critical periods.

Bierce uses this figure again here, in sentences four through seven: the subjects are the same ("faith . . . it . . . it . . . it"), as are the verbs ("is . . . is . . . is . . . is"). This sequence is bound still more closely together by the correlative conjunctions ("not . . . but . . . for . . . not only . . . but") in sentences five and six. If the sentences on a page may be thought of as the weft of the fabric, there is the warp, the vertical factor, as well. This comprises the similarities between sentences and groups of sentences, which are woven through these sentences and, by thus emphasizing various semantic and syntactic relationships, help bind these horizontal components, the sentences, into a whole.

An example of what might be called this weaving effect, a fairly subtle one, may be seen at the end of the first independent clause of the seventh sentence. At this point the implication is clear and clearly felt: faith is absurd and, therefore, in debate useless. This unvoiced "useless" contrasts with "use" in the same sentence's second independent clause (a ringing *non sequitur*), and prepares the reader for the contradictions to follow.[33]

Others of these "vertical" links appear in the passage, most obviously in sentences nine to twelve. The sequence of three reproachful simple interrogative sentences--technically, the trope *epiplexis* ("do not . . . do not . . . are not")--culminates in sentence twelve, the complex interrogative containing the dilemma thus led up to. A final link helps dramatize the plight of the persona, constrained and finally immobilized by the tightening loops of his question-begging thought; this link occurs in sentences fourteen and fifteen. They are paired: both are compound-complex declaratives, and their structure is close enough that together they constitute an instance of *isocolon*. This figure derives added point by the inclusion of another, *conduplicatio*, the repetition of a word or words in succeeding clauses: both sentences have as their key word "faith." The balanced and orderly patterning of these two sentences, then, furnishes a quiet and ironic negation of their content, "reasoning" that comes a full 360 degrees within their boundaries. In sentence fourteen "faith" is rejected; in the following one it is as quickly retrieved; and the remainder of the passage follows from this stalemate, emphasized by the syntax, between faith discredited by reason and reason corrupted by faith.

"Bierce," sensing his predicament, tries to pass over it quickly (the trope used is *metastasis*, a hurried evasion: "Anyhow"); launches a sodden platitude (the trope *sententia*: "Where even the wisest . . ."); and expires in an impotent threat (*cataplexis*: "they should all be stewed"). Bierce has made his point: "an intelligent use of the sword of Faith," the measure proposed and demonstrated by his persona, is a contradiction in terms. And his attack on the Faith through faith ends on the right note.

The figures have subtly but materially helped it do so. Besides ordering the passage they provide a sub-verbal commentary on it. The *anaphora* and the correlative sequence in sentences five, six, and the first part of sentence seven emphasize, by their balanced orderliness, the disorderliness of the thought that follows; the *anaphora* which structures the *epiplexis* has, in sentences nine through twelve, the same effect; and the *isocolon* and *conduplicatio* function this way in sentences fourteen and fifteen. Thus the logic, irony, and figures--the delicate ends of Worcester's and my spectra--effectively counter the fundamentalist persona's invective.

## 5. 1372

> 1 The last aspirant for eternal infamy is a jolly Scot--the Rev. John Macpherson. 2 According to the Dundee *Advertiser*, this pious idiot has been drooling weak venom upon the memory of Robert Burns, compared with whom *he* is as a dunghill to Mount Carmel. 3 "It seems"--to this toad-hearted moral fraud--"that a glamor is over the eyes of men who see genius in Burns. I can only term unsanctified genius diabolical cleverness" concludes the nose-harping simpleton. 4 O, Christian friends--ye who rail at the mythology of the heathen, and shout prayers for the triumph of your own--who go about with the high moon mirrored in your speculative eyes, blessing God for gospel light--whose ears are full of the dull thunder of angels' wings, and whose senses are alert for the Second Coming--look upon this product of your system, this Reverend John Macpherson! 5 O, but he is a beauty--a fair and odorous blossom, in sooth--a very summing-up of all spiritual sweetness--a grand total of multifold intelligences! 6 Ah! it is an inspiring spectacle, this weaponed and war-painted sausage, standing sturdily *en garde* against the Prince of the Power of the Air in a caroling poet! 7 O, where is Swift? where is Pope? whither has Voltaire gone? 8 Pray God their successor may arrive full soon, that this man Macpherson's memory may be gibbeted before it shall decay! 9 Lo! it is even now too late. "Lord, by this time he stinketh!"

Although Bierce was an instinctive rationalist, there were many occasions throughout his career when he found himself on the wrong side of the logical fence--as in the passage above, published on February

10th. Bierce's blunder here is that he has attacked the man only. This is the direct opposite of complaint, in which only the offense is attacked, and is equally ineffective because satire must compass both offender and offense. If it fails to do so it sacrifices pertinence and therefore interest, and grades into either sermon or (equally dull) tantrum. Little punishment is being meted out here, just as there was little contact of lash with back in the very early, frenzied, and feeble diatribes against Mr. Russell and the Caucasian Society. Despite the obvious skill in (and care lavished upon) this present piece and others like it, they are evidence of satiric backsliding.

The reasons for such relapses may be deduced with some confidence from the contexts in which they appear. They were anger, boredom, ignorance of his subject, and contempt for his subject. He probably felt that such people as Macpherson were not worth serious consideration --as perhaps they weren't. But, it might reasonably be asked, why then were they worth writing about at all?

According to Bierce, anything worth doing at all is worth paying someone to do. One almost wishes he had subcontracted this attack to a cooler head. He has elected to ignore the legitimate openings Macpherson leaves him--smugness, parochialism, sanctimoniousness, philistinism--and to launch a vigorous and baroque *argumentum ad hominem*. The overall effect is the figure *bomphiologia* (literally, booming, buzzing speech), or bombast.

*Bomphiologia* is not necessarily a flaw. Properly handled (i.e., when it clearly enunciates the evil which ostensibly occasions it) this figure can be effective. Here is an example of methodical Biercean frenzy, a part of which was quoted earlier:

> Senator Miller's hot-gospeling-dirty-worker, the Rev. Halleluja Cox, is a-mount the political stump pumping out of the lung of him copious discharges of blue bosh in payment for his master's services in keeping him in the pension office and out of the penitentiary. He is noisable, slaverous, gesticulose--he makes ill. This resounding vulgarian, whose advocacy of religious living once made sin so respectable that he was uneasy in its practice; whose character is the result of a compromise between the Devil, who wanted him for a criminal, and the Lord, who wished to make him a fool; from whose coarse hands the veterans of the civil war receive with reluctance and aversion the meager reward of the valor that has given him a fat salary; this professor of perspirational piety; this spittle-casting word-whanger; this mucker--has the hardihood to hold a political opinion and press it upon others. May the devil discolor me if I make not his incumbency of the stump a pain to him.[34]

This attack has a number of interesting features, but its most noticeable one, *anaphora*, is the most germane. This figure ("whose . . . whose . . . whose . . . this . . . this . . . this") provides a framework which enables Bierce to incorporate a rationale for his scurrility. These two, the reason and the abuse, complement each other and make the attack effective. The Cox piece is also an *argumentum ad hominem*, but one that is reinforced by another argument, less explicit but more cogent: neither Church nor State needs a man given to demagoguery, sycophancy, profiteering, and hypocrisy. It is a variation on the dictum that one cannot serve God and Mammon, the word "master" in the first sentence providing a clue to the implicit argument and its basic thrust.

The attack on Macpherson, however, lacks this rational substructure. Since there is no logic involved, the rhetoric must do double duty, carrying as well as reinforcing the argument, and becoming in the process quite strained. The result is a fervid and unsuccessful attempt to supplant matter by manner.

He begins with *aischrologia* ("foul abuse"), a trope well-suited to the *ad hominem* argument. Macpherson is an "idiot," a "dunghill," a "toad-hearted moral fraud," a "nose harping simpleton" (evidence of Bierce's growing onomatopoetic powers), and a "sausage." This opening description is supplemented in the fourth sentence with an *apostrophe* followed by an interpolated series of three relative clauses (*anaphora*) which constitute the trope *characterismus*, a delineation of the essence of a person or group--the purpose presumably being to get Macpherson into perspective by placing him in a context.

How well this ostensible purpose is achieved can be debated, but the structure of this fourth sentence is interesting because it is one that Bierce used increasingly from this point on. Virginia Tufte and others use the term "mid-branching" (the Greeks called it *parenthesis*) to describe this arrangement which, basically, brackets grammatically extraneous material between that which is grammatically integral. There are advantages to this technique of sandwiched syntax, advantages that recommend themselves to such a writer as Bierce. Sentences that branch to the left (that is, begin with grammatically extrinsic material), or ones that branch in the middle, enable their author to avoid patterning his writing directly upon his thinking. As Professor Tufte points out, thought is cumulative, each succeeding thought tending to ground itself in the one preceding before elaborating on it.[35] Phrases or clauses that either precede or interrupt the main thought of a sentence are able to modify an as-yet-unintroduced antecedent. For example, the chaotic metaphorical activities of the Christians, presented in the mid-branch of sentence four, constitute the "system" mentioned in the second half of the sentence proper. It seems natural (keeping in mind Follett's observations on Bierce's zigzag technique) for Bierce to have frequently adopted this essentially backward--predication first, that which is predicated second--approach.

The effect of this reversal of the normal cumulative order is twofold: first, the meaning of the sentence is kept, for a variable space, suspended. This permits the already elaborated and therefore emphasized key word to fall at the sentence's end, the usual place of greatest emphasis, thus redoubling this key word's weight. Second, by disposing of sentence-modifying phrases and clauses at the outset, this technique, which may also encapsulate such phrases and clauses in mid-sentence, creates a sense of syntactic self-sufficiency and finality.

That Bierce would tend to employ techniques which made his writing more emphatic and authoritative is reasonable, considering his desire to write forcibly and the progress he has so far made in that direction. It is reasonable, also, to expect him to explore ways of making his writing concise, since (to repeat a point made earlier) the fewer the words, the greater weight of meaning borne by each, and the more each one tells. We have noted a few instances of Bierce's conscious or unconscious syntactic trimming and pruning in connection with his use of *anaphora*, by which elisions are permitted by the underlying syntactic logic. A less obvious but perhaps more effective means of concentrating meaning is the use of the strongly mid-branching sentence.

For example, sentence four of this passage is really a disguised paragraph. Its kernel sentences, those basic utterances which can be thought of as the syntactic atoms of longer and more complex statements, unfold themselves something like this:

Christian friends rail at something.

Christian friends shout something.

Christian friends go about with something.

This something is mirrored in something.

Christian friends are blessing something.

Christian friends have ears.

These ears are full of something.

Christian friends have senses.

These senses are alert for something.

Christian friends look upon something.

This something is the Reverend John Macpherson.

The first nine of these constituent proto-sentences are said by generative/transformational grammarians to be "inserted" into the tenth. (The eleventh is an appositive right branch.) That is, they are stripped of some inessentials and incorporated into what has become the "matrix" sentence.

There are several "transformational rules" or, more precisely, symbolic descriptions for this process. The kernel sentences to be inserted in sentence four are first changed to relative clauses. This is done by a transformation which rearranges the kernels so that a noun phrase is followed by an appropriate relative pronoun, which is in turn followed by the elements (if any) that had formerly come before and after that noun phrase--x and y, respectively, in this formula:

$$x + NP + y \Rightarrow NP \left\{\begin{array}{l}\text{who}\\ \text{which}\\ \text{that}\end{array}\right. + x + y$$

This noun phrase can then be omitted since the insert new enlarged context clearly identifies it. Also, as in the fifth hypothetical kernel, the relative pronoun and the form of the verb to be may be dropped, leaving the participle to supply the verbal force, and the context to supply the identity of that which is predicated, thus:

$$\text{NP} + \text{Relative Pronoun} + \text{Tense} + \text{Be} + x \Rightarrow \text{NP} + x\text{*}$$

In this way sentences are made dependent, transformed into relative clauses, and the relative clauses into participial phrases. In this way also redundancies are excised, since transformations do not impair the meanings of the original kernels nor change the relationships between the words. Such transformations may clarify word relationships, as in sentence four: repetition of the subject ("friends") is obviated by the transformations; consequently, one subject governs seven verbs. This arrangement constitutes the figure *diazeugma*, the effect of which is to emphasize predication. Since in this case the string of verbs depicts deranged and random activity, it leads nicely up to, and underscores the irony of, the word "system" immediately following.

This is one mechanism of syntactic compression. Similarly, and with similar effect, appositives may be reduced by deletion transformations from kernels. Sentence five, for example, readily resolves itself into its kernel sentence parts:

He is a beauty.

He is a blossom.

He is a summing-up.

He is a total.

Here the subjects and predicates of the final three kernels are deleted, leaving the predicate nominatives (each of which constitutes the trope *antiphrasis*, the irony of a word) to stand as a multiple predicate nominative for the subject "he."

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*G-T grammarians find it helpful to write tense in their equations as an element separate from the verb, so that both may be separately manipulated in the various transformations; it applies to that which it immediately precedes.

Virginia Tufte writes of the appositive that "it is one of the devices favored by the professional writer, one that contributes to the density of texture that often distinguishes his work from that of an amateur."[36] It is easy to see why. Appositives of the kind that modify sentences are often sentences themselves, concentrated ones, representing a further shortening of the already curtailed relative clause or, as in the fifth sentence of this passage, a direct shortening of a kernel sentence into its predicate nominative.*

The relative clause, participial phrase, and appositive, then, are methods for telescoping sentences together and, because the deletion transformations involved are much less flexible than methods for arriving at a paraphrase or precis, for keeping these sentences' meanings intact and distinct.

It is worth noticing, too, that these composite sentences, four and five, besides saying a lot in a little space, are also in a way parallel: the three relative clause groups in the former balance the three appositives in the latter. This double sequence constitutes a climax of sorts, one that moves from the general to the particular and from bad to worst. This parallelism is emphasized by both sentences having the same opening word, "O," and by both (and sentences six, seven, eight, and nine following) being cast in the form of the trope *ecphonesis*, an exclamation. Bierce rounds off his attack with a characteristic closing curse--technically, *ara*, a formal imprecıation: "Pray God . . ."

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*Not all appositives modify sentences; "close" or "restricted" appositives (river *Jordan*, fountain *Arethuse*, Uncle *George*) function as a unit with their antecedents and are not set off by punctuation.

With all the rhetoric, however; and with all the balance, coherence, and pithiness of his sentences; and with all the care he has taken in their construction and disposition, this passage is a failure because it doesn't really say anything--except that Bierce is ill-disposed to Macpherson. That is, sound has displaced sense, instead of supplementing and complementing it. This is a serious weakness, one he never outgrew.[37]

This weakness is, in a sense, the opposite of the one that distinguishes his worst and earliest writing. There, figures were either inadequate or, more often than not, lacking; and the tropes were obtrusive and rudimentary. In the Macpherson passage, however, there are certainly enough figures (*bomphiologia, anaphora, parenthesis, diazeugma*)--too many, in fact: by using patterns as a substitute for sense, Bierce has obscured the sense-bearing tropes. Here, it is the figures that are obtrusive.

In short, the Macpherson passage is an illustration of increased stylistic skill and decreased effectiveness. The complex methodology was necessary in order to bring out this seeming anomaly, which is important (because typical) but not readily explicable. The point is that this passage is a bravura piece, an exercise, an ingenious and ostentatious evasion. The reason it fails is that it lacks discipline.

Mark Twain had similar problems. John C. Gerber has argued persuasively that Twain's style is at its best in *Huckleberry Finn* because the point of view is detached and sharply restricted, and at its worst in the travel books because the point of view is neither--an invitation to self-indulgence, inconsistency, and other stylistic woes.[38] Both Twain's and Bierce's excesses are at bottom logical lapses: Twain failed to ask himself, consistently, what could be logically seen, felt, thought, and spoken from a particular point of view; Bierce often failed to ask whether his objections stemmed from reason or prejudice, and if from reason, how that reason might be used to order these objections. The result, in both Twain and Bierce, is that the reader is confronted by feeling untransformed by art or only partially transformed by craft.

The specific result in the Macpherson piece is that rhetorical devices which should work together don't. There are uncontrolled tropes here because the figures, elaborate as they are, provide them little impetus or point. Bierce is moving smartly along the trope/figure continuum, but he has here left behind his semantic luggage (except for a few tropes--*aischrologia, characterismus, antiphrasis*--that are really just refined name-calling). This is unfortunate for both content and form; as Professor Duhamel puts it: "form degenerates when cultivated to the exclusion of substance which should determine it."[39]

A symptom of the atrophy in Bierce pieces hamstrung by this exclusion (little meaning and less logic) is the lame way in which such pieces end: With no logical substructure, however elementary or unobtrusive, there can be no logical ending, and the passage will remain suspended despite any alogical devices brought to bear in an effort to achieve a satisfactory close. Such detached rhetoric is like muscle separated from bone: the muscle can move, but without much power or purpose. The style that results is *asiatismus*, that is, one full of sound and figures, and empty of matter. And the effect of such a style, its impression on the reader, is--to borrow Bierce's own metaphor from a different context--"the martial strut of a boned turkey."

# NOTES

[1] It was reprinted in *The Fiend's Delight*, s.v. "Items from the Press of Interior California," p. 175, and eventually found its way into the *Works*, s.v. "Miscellaneous," XII, 316-17.

[2] Many pre-Civil War writers dealt in this form, their work often appearing in W. T. Porter's New York paper, the *Spirit of the Times*. Among these early yarn-spinners were J. K. Paulding, David Crockett, S. F. Smith, A. G. McNutt, J. S. Robb, and G. W. Harris. Perhaps the best-known hyperbolic tale of the frontier press is Twain's "Journalism in Tennessee," written about three years after Bierce's "Interior Items."

[3] *Wasp*, 2 September 1881.

[4] *News-Letter*, 26 December 1868.

[5] *News-Letter*, 2 January 1869.

[6] *News-Letter*, 29 May 1869.

[7] *News-Letter*, 22 May 1869.

[8] *News-Letter*, 23 April 1870.

[9] *News-Letter*, 27 February 1869.

[10] *Wasp*, 30 April 1881.

[11] *Wasp*, 22 July 1882.

[12] *Wasp*, 29 December 1883.

[13] *Argonaut*, 20 July 1878.

[14] *Argonaut*, 6 October 1877.

[15] Walker, op. cit.; the term is the title of his eighth chapter.

[16] *News-Letter*, 29 May 1869.

[17] *News-Letter*, 28 August 1869.

[18] *Wasp*, 26 January 1884.

[19] "George the Made-over," "Tangential Views," *Works*, IV, 50-51.

[20] *Argonaut*, 19 April 1879.

[21] *Argonaut*, 24 May 1879.

[22] McWilliams, pp. 82-83.

[23] "Technique as Discovery," *Forms of Modern Fiction*, ed. William Van O'Connor (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1948), p. 11.

[24] This *Fiend's Delight* "Laughorism" appears, very slightly altered, s.v. "Epigrams," *Works*, VIII, 357.

[25] "The Satire of Ambrose Bierce: Its Objects, Forms, Devices, and Possible Origins," Diss. Southern Cal. 1945, p. 362.

[26] Quoted from McWilliams, p. 287.

[27] "Epigrams," *Works*, VIII, 368.

[28] Follett, p. 285. He gives four examples of this zigzag technique, all from "Fantastic Fables" (*Works*, VI, 165-325); here is one, "The Eligible Son-in-Law" (pp. 280-81):

> A Truly Clever Person who conducted a savings bank and lent money to his sisters and his cousins and his aunts was approached by a Tatterdemalion who applied for a loan of one hundred thousand dollars.
>
> "What security have you to offer?" asked the Truly Clever Person.
>
> "The best in the world," the applicant replied, confidentially; "I am about to become your son-in-law."
>
> "That would indeed be gilt-edged," said the banker, gravely: "but what claim have you to the hand of my daughter?"
>
> "One that cannot lightly be denied," said the Tatterdemalion. "I am about to become worth one hundred thousand dollars."
>
> Unable to detect a weak point in this scheme of mutual advantage, the Financier gave the Promoter in Disguise an order for the money and wrote a note to his wife directing her to count out the girl.

[29] Here, for instance, is one of George Orwell's examples, culled from *Poetry Quarterly:*

> "Comfort's catholicity of perception and image, strangely Whitmanesque in range, almost the exact opposite in aesthetic compulsion, continues to evoke that trembling atmospheric accumulative hinting at a cruel, an inexorably serene timelessness. . . . Wrey Gardiner scores by aiming at simple bull's-eyes with precision. Only they are not so simple, and through this contented sadness runs more than the surface bittersweet of resignation." ("Politics and the English Language," *The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters of George Orwell*, eds. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus [London: Secker and Warburg, 1968] IV, 132, n.1.)

I am, I realize, open to charges of jargon here myself, because of all the Greek and Latin terms. My excuse must be, simply, that most of these terms have been in use for at least two thousand years, that they are as useful now as ever, and that inventing English equivalents would only compound the confusion. For example, not many know the meanings of *acyrologia, antiphrasis, charientismus*, and *mycterismus;* Puttenham's Englished versions of these would be, or so I imagine, Greek to almost everyone: Uncouthe, Broad Floute, Privie Nippe, and Fleering Frumpe (see Lanham's *Handlist*, pp. 103, 20, 79, 52).

[30] Here is an early passage from the *News-Letter* (27 January 1872), which indicates Bierce's understanding of the link between language and ethics:

> Sam. Williams, we are ashamed of you. Nice talk this--modest too--from a journalist. "The press is proud to be accounted one of those vital forces that impel mankind toward a noble goal and a higher destiny; one of the chief motors of human progress, and one of the chief instruments of a higher civilization!" Is a toast to be regarded as an invitation for the thing toasted to glorify itself? You know very well that this stale old compliment to the press is lugged in at every banquet only to tickle the reporters with a sense of their importance and prevent them from ridiculing the whole affair. Besides, your apotheosis of your own profession is mostly bosh, and a very poor article of bosh at that. . . . . . Sam, your remarks were not only false and in bad taste, but they were absurd. Suppose Deacon Fitch should come to you with the fascinating prospectus of the Big Bilk Homestead Swindle, and say--"Mr. Williams, these scoundrels have paid me well to puff their infernal scheme, and I wish you would put this in as a piece of news, adding such editorial commendation as you think safe." Would this be impelling mankind to a higher destiny? In carrying out Mr. Fitch's instructions would you be a chief motor of human progress, and a chief instrument of a higher civilization? Sam, we doubt it.

Bierce wrote--transcribed, rather--this book review thirty-two years later for the *Cosmopolitan*. Except for a note on the publishing data, it consists solely of an excerpt from the novel under consideration, presumably because Bierce could think of no words more damning than the author's own:

> "She remained inactive in his embrace for a considerable period, then modestly disengaging herself looked him full in the countenance and signified a desire for self-communion. By love's instinct he divined her purpose--she wanted to consider his proposal apart from the influence of the glamour of his personal presence. With the innate tact of a truly genteel nature he bade her good evening in French, and with measured tread paced away into the gathering gloom." (Quoted from McWilliams, p. 287)

[31] *The Enlarged Devil's Dictionary*, comp., ed. Ernest Jerome Hopkins (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967).

[32] Below are two examples of Bierce's early grisliness; there are hundreds like them:

> David Regensburger, a tender twig of the law, aged seventeen, won his first case before Judge Sawyer last Tuesday. It is tolerably

> melancholy to think upon the future of this juvenile; turn we to a more pleasing subject: A boy of twelve was recently sent to the Industrial School of Chicago for playing marbles on the holy Sabbath day with his dead mother's eyes, which he had cunningly extracted with an iron spoon. In all that constitutes a healthy precocity, Chicago is still ahead of San Francisco." (*News-Letter*, 8 October 1870)

> . . . if one do but adorn his awkwardness with the grace of persistence he merits a certain temperate meed of praise only less than that accorded to actual genius. For this reason we regard Mr. Michael Brannan, of Los Angeles, with feelings of unmixed admiration, and we clamor shrilly against the legal obtuseness that lodged him in jail. Mr. Brannan had tired of life's fitful fever, and sought to effect a cure with a pistol--a vulgar, hackneyed expedient justly deserving of emphatic disapproval. But mark the high qualities of this man! He emptied five barrels of that weapon at his head, each leaden pellet plowing its crimson groove through the Brannan scalp, but not ducking beneath the bone to the heroic brain within. The man who could look upon this marvelous attempt unmoved with admiration--nay, who could himself withhold a friendly shot . . . (*News-Letter*, 2 January 1872)

[33] The *petitio* and the *non sequitur* were particularly galling to Bierce. In "The Art of Controversy" (*Works*, IX, 83-90) he gives glosses for several of an unnamed theologian's statements:

> "The fact that man can conceive the idea of space without beginning or end implies that man is on a journey without beginning or end. In fact, it is strong evidence of the immortality of man."
>
> Good--now observe the possibilities in that kind of "reasoning": The fact that a pig can conceive the idea of a turnip implies that the pig is climbing a tree bearing turnips--which is strong evidence that the pig is a fish. . . .(p. 85)
>
> "The fact that we do not remember our former lives is no proof of our never having existed. We would remember them if we had accomplished something worth remembering."
>
> Note the unconscious *petitio principii* involved in the first "our" and the pure assumption in the second sentence. (pp. 85-86)

> The kind of "argument" here illustrated by horrible example is not peculiar to religious or doctrinal themes, but characterizes men's reasoning in general. It is the rule everywhere--in oral discussion, in books, in newspapers. Assertions that mean nothing, testimony that is not evidence, facts having no relation to the matter at hand, and (everywhere and always) the sickening *non sequitur:* the conclusion that has nothing to do with the premises. I know not if there is another life, but if there is I do hope that to obtain it all will have to pass a rigid examination in logic and the art of not being a fool. (p. 87)

[34] *Wasp*, 27 September 1884.

[35] *Grammar as Style* (New York: Holt, 1971), pp. 148-53.

[36] Ibid., p. 161.

[37] Cf. Chapter three, Sections 3 and 4, passim.

[38] "The Relation Between Point of View and Style in the Works of Mark Twain," *Style in Prose Fiction: English Institute Essays, 1958*, ed. Harold C. Martin (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1959), pp. 142-171, esp. p. 143.

[39] "The Function of Rhetoric as Effective Expression," *The Province of Rhetoric*, eds. Joseph Schwartz and John A. Rycenga (New York: Ronald Press, 1965), p. 46.

# CHAPTER TWO: *FIGARO* AND THE *ARGONAUT*

## 1. 1874

Although Bierce had often shown himself to be stalwart in life and in letters, and sometimes conspicuously fearless, he was seldom foolhardy. He seems to have become more prudent during his three and a half years in England. He was past thirty, with a wife and baby, and he was writing to make money; any enjoyment his contributions to *Fun*, or *Figaro*, or the *Lantern* might have given him was secondary. And any zest he derived from his journalism at this time certainly did not come from skating as close as possible to a lawsuit several times a week--British libel laws were much more stringent than Californian ones. The attack on Macpherson, for example, was reprinted in London (Bierce apparently thought well enough of it for that), but with "Macpherson" amended to "Macsnuffle."[1]

He could have, following the lead of many British journalists, dealt in refined blackmail, calumny, and innuendo, but with one or two exceptions, he didn't. He could also have kept to safer forms--travel diaries, for example--as did Twain and Charles Warren Stoddard, but, except for "Notes by a Phantom American" and a few other pieces, he avoided such forms and posed as an Englishman in his columns.

Why he did so is not clear. His California background could have been an asset because Britishers then relished anything smacking of the Wild West. And it is true that his first two books, *Fiend's Delight* and *Nuggets and Dust* (composed of old *News-Letter* material and published pseudonymously), were well received. My guess--and it is nothing more--is that Bierce posed as a Briton in his columns because he wanted to become one in real life, because London was about as far as he could get from an Indiana farm. I suspect that he wanted to be taken seriously, and realized that this was unlikely if he were just another transatlantic curiosity.

As an anglicized American, there were certain things he could not do. Unlike Joaquin Miller, he could not spear boiled potatoes with a bowie knife and bite ladies' feet at tea. Wild Western literary manners were similarly inappropriate. England, then, was not just a different country for Bierce, but a radically different literary milieu. His subject matter was new to him, as were the tastes and expectations of his audience. Add to this unfamiliarity the pressure of writing for half a dozen publications in order to support a growing family, and the result was, often, insipid satire.

These two passages from *Figaro* (12, 26 September 1874) show how feeble and oracular Bierce's London satire could be. The second is an apology for the first. This is significant in itself because it is one of only a dozen or so genuine retractions made during his entire career. The first passage is only partially redeemed by the Biercean image at the end:

> The parishioners of Snelston, in the diocese of Lichfield, expecially "the useful poor," are to be congratulated; they are to

> have one of the finest parsonages in England. This is already building, and is to cost thirty thousand pounds, *plus* the usual excess of actual over-estimated expenditure--say forty thousand pounds altogether. The jewel that this elegant casket is to contain is the Rev. C. F. Broughton, M.A., whose business--a tolerably profitable one, it would seem--is to expound the teaching of Him concerning whom it is written that He had not where [sic] to lay His head, but whose early followers were permitted to lay theirs in prisons and the dens of wild beasts, and on the block of the hospitable headsman. Thirty thousand pounds, indeed; why, it would go far towards purchasing Lambeth Palace! If the parishioners of the Rev. Mr. Broughton (M.A.) desire anything more in this world they are the most exacting of men, and it is to be hoped they will not get it. As for Mr. Broughton, let us be generous; when he gets his new house completed, let us all do what we can to make it warm for him.
>
> --I am quite well aware, and feel a certain satisfaction in knowing, that the foregoing paragraph will be held to be conceived in abominably bad taste, by the eminently respectable and comfortable Christians who believe with John P. Robinson that "they didn't know everything down in Judee." I don't say they did; but I do say that if there is any one thing that both the letter and the spirit of the New Testament emphatically and unmistakably condemns [sic] it is the accumulation of riches while the poor lack bread. I think I am familiar with all that can be urged on the other side; Heaven knows that all that can be urged *is* urged with significant frequency and earnestness; but the fatal defect of all such arguments employed is that, although adduced solely to satisfy the conscience of the adducer, they don't do it. There would be joy in the Church of England if some practical theologian would construct a gigantic needle and drive a camel through its eye; and he would be overwhelmed with offers of money to keep that camel going.

The extended mea culpa furnishes, it will be noticed, an opportunity for Bierce to reaffirm his orthodoxy:

> With reference to a new parsonage which, some weeks ago, I said was building at Snelston for the Rev. C. F. Broughton, at a cost of thirty thousand pounds sterling, that gentleman writes that he hopes it will not cost one tenth part of that sum. I certainly hope it will not, and wish that it may be as comfortable as if it had cost a million. My information--erroneous, of course--was derived from a Welsh journal, the name of which I cannot remember, published at a town the name of which I have forgotten also, though I am sure it begins with a double-L. It was probably Llandudno, if there is such a place. There was, of course, no intention to do the reverend gentleman an injustice. As a man of mark in the civil service of a government which charges itself with the care and cure of souls, he must expect criticism, even of the jocular sort, to which as a teacher acting without official warrant he would not be fairly subject. The general considerations which the error of fact led me to present I conceive not to have been diminished in validity, though I regret the unfortunate result of my initial and final experiment in believing a Welsh newspaper.[2]

At other times, however, Bierce capitalized on his inexperience, either by avoiding things American and British--as in his still very readable "Fables of Zambri the Parsee"[3]--or, when treating topical matters, by attending to them closely.

This close attention benefited his style. By skirting the shaky ground of British personalities, he arrived at what could be shown to be issues; that is, instances of vice or folly recognizable as such not only in England or the United States, but wherever the language and reason were understood. In short, Bierce kept increasingly to the high ground of logic; the logic provided a controlling context for his figures and tropes, and gave them direction.

Bierce did not learn to think clearly and write forcibly in England; previous quotations have shown that he could do both before arriving there. What England did (or seems to have done) for Bierce and his style is to provide a new rhetorical climate, one which favored le mot juste and discouraged bombast. Bierce was thus encouraged to go right to the logical heart of the matter more often, perhaps, than he would have done had he remained in California. At any rate his work from this period strongly suggests that he was making a greater effort to deal intelligently with his subjects, to develop restraint, and to choose his words with care. His language tended to be more temperate than it had been, and his objections more lucidly, if more quietly, enunciated.

> 1 The Rev. Dunbar Heath has been at considerable pains to explain to the Anthropological Institute the precise function of what he calls the "psychoplasm," a film outside the brain, which does all the thinking. 2 To the rather obvious objection that there isn't any such film, the reverend gentleman replies that it is always proper to introduce new ideas, even if they cannot be proven to be true. 3 He may do that sort of thing in his pulpit as much as he likes; that is one of the many privileges which, as a confessedly superior being, he enjoys. 4 But in scientific matters there is a preference for statements not only based upon,

> but accompanied by, what is known as evidence, as distinguished from testimony.
>
> 5 The Rev. Mr. Heath may as well learn now as later, and from me as well as from anyone, that until Science be reverently removed from amongst us, and set upon a pinnacle above all discussion by the vulgar herd who are made to pay for her support, all assertions with regard to her are liable to rather close and searching criticism. 6 Even the poor humorist, who is so often struck upon the mouth by the thing which imagines itself public opinion, and told to hold his disrespectful tongue from matters which are "not proper subjects for jocularity," may still speak his scientific mind with impunity; and I speak mine with entire honesty in telling Mr. Heath that unless he has been grossly misrepresented by the press--which is not unlikely--he has made himself as scientifically ridiculous as he is theologically gracious, dignified, and infallible.[4]

This is a reply to Rev. Heath's *ignoratio elenchi* (literally, "ignorance of confutation," an irrelevant conclusion), and an essay on the irrelevance of the unverifiable generally: a brief fling at epistemology in some ways similar to his attack on the Faith through faith, previously examined, from the *News-Letter* of 31 December 1870. As in the earlier piece, two ways of knowing are here pitted against each other in a loose and informal way--faith (Bierce's version) and induction.

The most noticeable figures in this passage are more extreme forms of two that have been noticed before: *isocolon*, which in places amounts almost to euphuism, and *parenthesis*, distention of a sentence's middle with (it may be) semantically important but syntactically extraneous material. Both figures contribute a tone of deliberateness --the one by balancing, the other by delaying completion of, the sentences. That is, while exalting induction over speculation, Bierce sounds scientific, thus making his observations the more plausible by lending them the weight of his example. The matter and the manner of the piece are more appropriate to each other than in some other passages we have seen.

For example, the correlative sequence in sentence four ("not only . . . but . . . what is known as . . . as distinguished from") gives the perhaps true impression that science is being discussed in a careful, balanced, scientific way. Moreover, *distinctio*, the definition of terms, is integral to science; and only the use of *litotes* in this sentence ("there is a preference for") indicates the underlying irony.

The second paragraph, however, is the more interesting of the two. It comprises only two sentences, and these two are over half mid-branch.

The first of these latter two sentences, number five, continues and mirrors the balanced construction of the previous sentence with its pair of *antitheses* ("now . . . later . . . from me . . . from anyone"), and in so doing constitutes a rhetorical *metabasis* or transition between the first paragraph and the second. This pair of *antitheses* is also the first of the paragraph's five increasingly extended parenthetical qualifications and elaborations ("now . . . anyone," "until . . . support," "who . . . jocularity," "unless . . . unlikely," "which . . . unlikely") which culminate in this final one, a *parenthesis* within a *parenthesis*.

The fifth sentence, then, and both independent clauses of the sixth, contain large amounts of internally organized matter containing, in turn, a full complement of relative clauses and prepositional and infinitive phrases. What is the point of all this studied involution? Professor Tufte has put her finger on it:

> The effect, then, is to compress the sentence unit from both ends, to provide a useful tightening of expression appropriate to a highly controlled, logically organized style. This compressive force gives the mid-branching sentence a peculiar density not shared by the looser cumulative sentence, the latter operated on by

> a kind of centrifugal force, so to speak, that tends to spin its materials out from the center rather than to concentrate them there. . . . [The mid-branching sentence] suggests that its author has begun to say what he intends, has interrupted himself to elaborate so far as he feels *in advance* is necessary, and has then added the required grammatical conclusion, all without the need of a cumulative afterthought.[5]

To sum up: in Bierce's concluding sentences the grammatically integral material acts like a number of syntactic vises on the inserted material, unobtrusively imposing on the latter a compressed orderliness appropriate to a piece of writing occasioned by a logical blunder, and relying for its effect more on reasoning than on rhetorical virtuosity.

I noted earlier that the balanced construction lent point to the *antitheses* and appropriateness to the *distinctio*--this by way of indicating how pattern complements the sense of the piece. The final sentence, too, is a good illustration of how logic influences the use of figures, and how figures, in turn, influence the use of tropes. The process here is rather complex.

First, the passage's concluding *antithesis* echoes Bierce's argument by pitting the two ways of knowing against each other in parallel phrases. *Antiphrasis*, the irony of a word, is a tributary trope which exploits this juxtaposition: qualified by (what has become in the course of the passage) the disparaging adverb "theologically," the adjectives "gracious," "dignified," and "infallible" become, roughly, their own antonyms. And "scientifically ridiculous . . . theologically gracious," etc., although in form the passage's final balancing *antithesis*, functions as the trope *synonymia*, amplification by synonym, since the four adjectives are by their adverbs rendered approximately equivalent.

Second, the use of *parenthesis* and *isocolon* is marked enough in this closing sentence that these two figures constitute (or might better be thought of as) a third: *hyrmos*, a long sentence in which the sense is suspended through a series of parallel elements. This construction allows Bierce's key word to fall in the key slot, at the end of the sentence and the passage, and thus receive the maximum emphasis. "Infallible" requires such emphasis if its subtleties are not to pass unnoticed.

Most obviously, the word connotes the doctrine of papal infallibility. This connotation is apposite in a religio-epistemological context because (some would argue) the doctrine is based on one of the great clerical illogicalities of all time.

Less obviously, the word embodies two tropes, *adianoeta* and *epiphonema*, the effects of the first constituting the second. "Infallible" cannot, of course, be taken in its usual sense--something like "mistake-proof"--because of the irony throughout the passage; but besides its ironic meaning--something like "totally erroneous"--there is another, limited, sense in which "infallible" can be taken almost literally: it can be taken to mean something like "refutation-proof." Understood in this sense, it can be seen to refer directly back to the opening of the passage where Mr. Heath's immunity to confutation was displayed. He showed himself (barring misrepresentation) to be, by virtue of his *ignoratio elenchi*, refutation-proof indeed. We have a choice: since "infallible" cannot be taken literally, it must mean either its opposite--"fallible"--or its contrary--"irrelevant." This choice constitutes the *adianoeta*, a calculated ambiguity; and Bierce's use of this trope here is a good example of his wittiness and my earlier definition of wit as an ironic pressure put on the language to make it reveal latent semantic possibilities: "infallible," because of its position and context, carries a great deal of meaning. This complicated description of logic-figure-trope interaction is intended to show where this meaning comes from and why it centers on this one significant word. The welter of Greek may be justified to the extent that this description and others constitute ponderous but accurate working models, objectifications, of how this ironic pressure works on the language to make it yield wit.

To conclude: because the ambiguity in "infallible" is fruitful and deft, it is witty. And since it is, and since it brings the passage to a clever and graceful close, the *adianoeta* can be seen as a successful instance of a final trope, *epiphonema*, a witty phrase added as a finishing touch.

Like Bierce's logical reversals, his use of *epiphonema* was becoming by this point a distinguishing characteristic of his style--both a hallmark of, and an important factor in, his best writing. The word's spelling suggests its kinship to epigram and provides a clue to the way Bierce used this trope: as an epigrammatic condensation of and commentary on that which precedes it. Seen this way, his later passages become more or less elaborate headnotes to a final meaningful sentence or clause. That is, the best of such passages resolve themselves into two parts: expansion, in which the idea develops in patterns, and contraction, in which the idea is compressed and concluded. Bierce's replies to the anti-Darwinians are a protracted example of the process; his reply to Rev. Heath is a representative one.

This statement/resolution technique is most obvious in those instances where Bierce chose, as he frequently did after the mid-1870's, to render these two parts in different modes--prose statement, verse resolution:

> The Baltimore branch of the "Grand Army of the Republic" refused to decorate the graves of the Confederate dead on Memorial Day. And now, no doubt, a full fathom down under his reunited country the mouldy bonework of many a Northern, and presumably Republican, warrior executes a quiet rattle of satisfaction at this evidence of surviving loyalty, the while his eye-sockets, like saucers rubbed with phosphorus, emit a faint lumination, and ghastly grows his grin.
>
> Bully for us, te-hee!
>    Down with the Johnnies, hoo-ray!
> Roses of love have we,
>    Thorns of neglect have they!
> Pebbles and grass and the dew,
>    Weeds and the rain and clay--
> Under the flowers the Blue,
>    Under the brambles the Gray.[6]

It will be noticed that the Grand Army is guilty of pettiness, a more serious lapse in the Biercean ethic than fuzzy thinking, and consequently one requiring more emphatic and explicit condemnation. Often, the effectiveness of Bierce's closing line varies inversely with its explicitness, and the result is that he punishes those least whom he considers most reprehensible. For example, his confutation of Mr. Leerburger's notion logically ends on the penultimate sentence:

> The *Examiner* is so good a paper that I hope it will not let Mr. Jeff S. Leerburger--whoever that gentleman may have the unhappiness to be--write any more criticism for its Sunday edition . . . Of Mr. Leerburger's competence as a critic one may judge from his dictum "that the voice of the many is the fundamental principle which stamps the recognition of the divine spark." From this it appears that a voice is a principle, that a principle can stamp, and that recognition can be stamped. I hardly know which is the more admirable, Mr. Leerburger's literary skill in expressing his idea, or the idea that Mr. Leerburger has to express; for when translated into English this noble example of mixed metaphor means that popularity is the test of merit, if it means anything. If that is so, it simplifies the function of the critic to a counting of noses, or to a Kearney-like call for a showing of hands. I should not like to have Mr. Leerburger lose a good situation, but isn't he better qualified to sweep out the office?[7]

The writing of hack criticism was, to Bierce, a grave offense, because it debased art. Those who wrote such criticism must therefore be punished, and punished explicitly. And thus we see Bierce dissipating the force of a perfectly good *reductio ad absurdum* by appending an uninspired *argumentum ad hominem*.

The point here is not that Bierce's anger invariably marred his more serious attacks, but that it tended to do so. That is, Bierce considered the Leerburgers of the world to be noxious and the Reverend Heaths to be amusing, but Mr. Leerburger is left a legitimate opening for a counter-attack (Bierce's vindictiveness) and the less culpable Rev. Heath is left none.

## 2. 1877

> 1 On Sunday last, when all Christendom was celebrating the rising of our Savior from the dead; when the churches of half a world were decorated in memory of the stupendous event; when pastors preached of it to the people, with full hearts and in words pregnant of a great hope; when songs of adoration burst successively from island after island and continent after continent as they rolled from the black shadow of the globe into the light of that holy day; then the Rev. John Hemphill bethought him it was a famous anniversary--the seventh of his accession to the pastorate of Calvary Church! 2 Resurrection and ascension--the passing from the valley of the shadow of obscurity in a turf tabernacle of Ireland to the ineffable glories of a San Francisco pulpit of real wood! 3 Sublime theme!--and right good use he made of his annual opportunity, to the unspeakable comfort of despairing souls and wholesome confusion of disbelievers in a new and better life, reward of pious walk and saintly conversation. 4 Still, it would have been a graceful compliment to have mentioned the other Savior too.

This was published on April 8, in the *Argonaut*. The unobtrusive *hyperbaton* ("Sunday last," instead of "last Sunday") immediately helps set the ironically exalted tone of this short piece's first three sentences. What follows this simple inversion in the first sentence is reminiscent of Bierce's treatment of Macpherson five years earlier; an extended attempt at the definition of a thing, accompanied and held together by a resolute *anaphora*. This repetition of the same thought in many forms--what the Greeks called *exergasia*--Wilson Follett has called "a sort of rhetorical crescendo, or climax by cumulative repetition of the same thought in images of mounting ferocity."[8] Follett is right about the formula; by this time--ten years into his career--it had become characteristically Biercean. But this figure, *exergasia*, was not limited to tirades; he used it in fun, as he does here.

This repetitiousness, which depended on Bierce's wit and imagination to keep it from sinking into tautology, has two immediately noticeable uses--especially noticeable when it occurs, as here, early in the paragraph. First, it gets and holds the reader's attention (by the time he finishes the first sentence he is half-way through the paragraph), and, second, it serves to inflate the passage in readiness for the needle-like understatement of the last line.

This passage, one of Bierce's more elaborate so far, does not originate in aversion to its subject or in response to a logical mistake, but in response to a mistake in timing on the minister's part: he could, for many obvious and good reasons, have selected a better time to spin his autobiography than Easter Sunday morning. It was not what he did, but when he did it. "When," Bierce accordingly begins, and repeats it three times, each respective clause longer and containing more kernel sentences than the one preceding. This constitutes the figure *auxesis*, clauses placed in climactic order. There is a second device involved here, *megaloprepeia*, magnificent utterance: each successive clause contains more elevated diction than the preceding one. This culminates in the finely alliterative "songs . . . burst successively . . . rolled . . . globe . . . holy."

The resolution to this highflown and emphatic introduction is the independent clause, beginning with the resounding "then," which complements the four "whens." This is the climax, and *its* resolution, the expected anti-climax, follows closely in the form of an appositive, or *epergesis*, which deflates what has gone before and anticipates the final deflation (in sentence four) of what is to come. The entire first sentence, then, is a good example of the figure *hyrmos*, seen in the previous section, a device by which the sense of a sentence is suspended through a sequence of parallel elements. This sentence contains exposition, statement, and resolution; it is a concentrated paragraph, compounded of sixteen or so kernel sentences; it is able to stand alone, though it may--as it is--be elaborated on.

Finally, it may be interesting to question how this sentence achieves its sense of self-sufficiency. I noted earlier that such effects could be produced by parenthetic or mid-branching sentences. This first sentence is not a mid-branching one but rather just the opposite; it leans heavily to the left of the independent clause in its climactic series of clauses and phrases, then to the right in its anti-climactic appositive. The grammatically intrinsic material bracketed by, instead of bracketing, the grammatically extrinsic, functions merely as a pylon about which the sense-bearing grammatically extrinsic material changes direction at high speed. But this opposite form conveys to the reader the same (perhaps only vaguely or unconsciously felt) impression of completeness, since both forms defer comprehension of the sentence's total sense until the end.

The two following sentences (the first of which is technically a fragment) follow the pattern established by the first: inflation, then deflation in the appositive. The diction--especially the alliteration, the plays on words, and the deft and unobtrusive imitations--complements this syntactic alternation.

We have seen Bierce's alliteration round out the first part of the first sentence, emphasizing the contrast between the sublimity of the diction and the mundaneness of the subject, and making his grand style grander still. The alliteration has an equal but opposite effect in the second sentence, emphasizing the descent into the vernacular in the appositive and therefore the contrast between the two parts of the sentence: "turf tabernacle" constitutes the trope *meiosis* (the use of a degrading epithet), and the alliterative t's lend it point, just as the sonorous "rolled . . . globe . . . holy" complements the elevated diction of the first sentence. This harmonizing of sound and semantics is worth noticing because Bierce has not always been able to achieve it. Alliteration, for example, is a figure particularly prone to abuse since it is easy to apply and can produce a striking effect. The tyro is likely to think that the more striking the effect is, the better it is; but what is striking can quickly become ridiculous. (Bierce's early characterization of Mr. Russell as a "miraculous manifestation of morbid meanness in Mother Nature" comes to mind as an unfunny and unsatiric example of this.)

In short, crude handling of an easy figure like alliteration backfires and results in tumidity. But properly and sparingly used, as I think it is in this paragraph, it can contribute to the total effect by subtly reinforcing more integral devices.

Besides keeping his alliteration on a tight rein here, Bierce does not give his word-play much play. We have seen evidence of the power that an easy and atrocious pun had upon the young Bierce. At times it seemed to master him; in ten years, however, he had nearly conquered this addiction.[9] In "The Pun," for example, he scorns the trope:

> O obvious Pun! thou hast the grace
> Of skeleton clock without a case--
> With its whole boweling displayed,
> And all its organs on parade.
>
> Dear Pun, thour't a common ground of bliss
> Where *Punch* and I can meet and kiss;
> Than thee my wit can stoop no lower--
> No higher his does ever soar.[10]

It is worth pointing out that in describing the metaphorical meeting Bierce accomplishes it as well, by punning on the "pun" in "*Punch*." This is the figure *agnominatio*, a play on the sound of words. It is unobtrusive enough, but it is perceptible, thanks to the arrangement: both "Pun" and "*Punch*" are the stressed halves of the initial iambs in a couplet. Here, the style not only conveys the action but simulates it--a nice touch, and greatly preferable to "Ripperdam scalp off!" certainly.

In the Hemphill passage we may notice a comparable pattern-induced deftness: Bierce's point argues itself, and because the contrast is reflected in, and for the most part conveyed by, syntactic arrangements, there is little need for the sense-bearing tropes. Accordingly, both instances of Bierce's playing with the meanings of words are unobtrusive but each contributes to establishing the sense of ironic incongruity that is the paragraph's main point.

The first is *paronomasia*, the standard double entendre, seen in the second sentence. It is interesting because of its aptness. "Resurrection," and "ascension," words bearing such enormous theological weight especially in any Easter-time context, are pared down, seemingly, to their bare denotative bones, totally denatured, and applied to the minister in a sense roughly equivalent to the contemporary sociologists' "upward mobility." The reader is minimally prepared for this application by Bierce's use of the word "accession" at the end of the first sentence. "Accession" partakes somewhat of the meanings of both and shares with them the -ion noun ending. But the result of course is that "resurrection" and "ascension" retain their freight of meaning and suggestion, all of which centers on Christ. And the implicit and grotesquely inappropriate comparison is made between Founder and follower

The second example of word-play, also in the second sentence, is an instance of *ploce*, the repetition of a word with a new significance. This trope occurs in the first key paragraph, quoted in chapter one. There, it seemed either inadvertent or, if consciously used, unsuccessful because pointless. But there is point to this present use of *ploce*, the same point behind all the devices in the passage, and that is emphasis on the disparity between Christ and Rev. Hemphill. "Shadow" in the first sentence requires the traditional allegorical interpretation--evil, sin, and death: it is "black," it is pervasive, and it is displaced by holy light. "Shadow" in the second sentence and second sense denotes only the "obscurity" for which it is the antecedent. Similarly, Bierce uses *mimesis*, in this case clerical jargon, to good effect: "new and better life" here means not "heaven" but "comfortable means."

This third sentence also, since it establishes Hemphill as an ironic savior, sets up the fourth sentence as the final deflation, prefigured three times by the undercutting appositives of the preceding sentences. The fourth sentence is an instance of the trope *litotes* in the figure *brevitas*; it is low-keyed and short, without exclamation marks, and it therefore contrasts with the rest of the passage. This final sentence is so clearly the result of all that has gone before, is so carefully led up to and fits so well, that it constitutes, I think, the trope *epiphonema*, the witty and telling finishing touch mentioned earlier.

This paragraph is an example of Bierce approaching his journalistic best. Each dictional, syntactic, and rhetorical element is placed with a view to every other such element and to the point being made. It has a beginning, middle, and end that follow each other naturally; it is a well-constructed passage. It would be difficult to find a better form for this particular content.

But the content itself is a problem. Surely this is an example of a peculiarly drab and insignificant butterfly being broken on an especially massive and elaborate wheel. It is well done but it is not at all clear that it is worth doing. I earlier likened Bierce's first efforts to those of a vigorous person trying to chop wood with an axe-handle; ten years later he has gotten a real axe and his wielding it with considerable skill, but upon twigs and kindling wood: Bierce's subjects were often not worth the effort he devotes to them at this stage in his career. There are several possible explanations: these were dull depression years; the *Argonaut's* policy called for fairly undeviating attention to the political left in San Francisco, and to the extent that this policy was followed the paper was correspondingly narrow and parochial; and Bierce was, after all, writing journalism, which is by definition largely superficial and ephemeral.

There is another explanation, one taken up in succeeding sections. To put it briefly, Bierce's growing rhetorical skill sometimes constituted his real subject matter. This is a refined version of the shortcomings in his earlier work: in the Macpherson piece, for example, Bierce never closes with Macpherson. In the present piece, Bierce comes to grips with Hemphill only so far as is necessary to display his virtuosity, and to anticipate somewhat: in a later passage we will see Bierce hardly deigning to notice his subject matter at all, his indifference vitiating this passage at least as much as his earlier zeal detracted from the one on Macpherson. The point here is not that Bierce's style is beginning to deteriorate, but that throughout his journalistic career, especially from the tenth year onward, there are two discernible and antagonistic tendencies: a growing ability to fully exploit, through logic and rhetoric, his subject matter, and, a growing disinclination to take the trouble.

To put this another way: Bierce no longer relied on sarcasm and easy irony, but he sometimes took elaborate advantage of the easy irony inherent in the situations about which he wrote--as with Hemphill's gaffe. All this is to say that after a decade of newspaper work, Bierce was an able writer and an occasionally self-indulgent journalist whose "Prattle" at such times reads as though he were following too closely his own later dictum that "manner is everything and matter nothing."[11]

## 3. 1878

> "Africa," says Bishop Simpson, "has no science; India and China have no science. How comes it that this science exists only where Christianity is?" 1 It is a coincidence, your reverence; what really produces, fosters, encourages, and conserves science is the silk stove-pipe hat. 2 The silk hat is not worn in Africa; India and China have it not. 3 Wherever the silk hat is planted on the human head, there science has taken root; no silk hats, no science--ignorance, error, superstition, moral and intellectual night. 4 It is the silk hat that has given us the graces, the refinements, the splendors of modern civilization--copious

> largess of wisdom and abundant benefaction of light. 6 It is the beacon, the pharos, of humanity, in the broad benignity of whose blaze our laden argosies elude the rocks and shoals of social disaster. 6 Your reverence's theory (grotesque as it is) has this value: It marks the hitherto unobserved coincidence that the silk-hatted, and therefore scientific, nations happen to profess Christianity. 7 It has not yet been observed that they practice it.

This paragraph, written for the *Argonaut* and published on September 21, is another of the terse, logical refutations at which Bierce had by this time become a master. It is easy to imagine his reverend victims of a decade earlier laughing or shrugging off a bombastic or irreverent attack; it is easy to imagine them making effective countercharges of immaturity and scurrility. But these later efforts--curt, cool, seemingly effortless, calculated, and effective as they are--would be much harder to impugn.

Bierce's answer to Bishop Simpson takes the form of an *encomium*, in which the Bishop's *post hoc ergo propter hoc* argument is matched with another, resulting in a fully-realized *reductio ad absurdum*. Characteristically, Bierce has reinforced his logic with a fitting array of rhetorical devices, carefully chosen diction, and appropriately formed sentences.

Since Bierce's whole argument is contained in his first sentence (in which his *post hoc* is yoked to the Bishop's), he has little need for tropes; the meaning is clear and only needs some embellishing. And only three of the devices used here fit comfortably into this trope category. These fall at the end of the piece and act as a summing-up. The first is seen in "therefore" in the sixth sentence. The word serves to recall the original logical blunder ("silk hatted, and therefore scientific") by condensing it and making unmistakable the confusion between temporal and causal sequence that is the blunder's essence. Functioning this way, "therefore" has the effect of constituting a telescoped version of the trope *anacephalaeosis*, a recapitulation.

The second device is the trope *epiphonema*, the witty finishing touch for which we have noticed, in the two previous passages, Bierce's growing preference: "It has not yet been observed that they practice it." This is another of Bierce's subtle changes in direction noted by Follett; after hoisting the Bishop on his own petard Bierce addresses himself to the fundamental mistake in the Bishop's reasoning: his underlying assumption that there *are* Christian nations, in the true sense of the word "Christian." It follows then, that to posit as the Bishop has done, an affinity between nominal Christianity and science-progress-civilization (near synonyms at the time) is both initially illogical and ultimately pointless.

Bierce's change of direction in his *epiphonema*, then, is only a superficial one; it is really only a skillful last-minute revelation of the covert thrust of his argument, from the accidental to the essential. This *epiphonema* is (keeping Professor Sheller's observation on the protean nature of Bierce's rhetorical devices in mind) the effect of an unstated third trope, *antirrhesis*, the rejection of an argument because of its insignificance, error, or wickedness. This particular *antirrhesis* is the implicit rejection of Bishop Simpson's implicit premise, that the Western nations imitate Christ. And the *antirrhesis* in turn rests on an initially unstated ambiguity, or *adianoeta*: "Christianity" as assent to a creed, versus "Christianity" as a system of virtuous living. The distinction was an important one to Bierce, quite familiar to his readers by this time, and since it was the ultimate rationale for most of his attacks on the clergy, was seldom very far beneath the surface in such attacks.

In even the earliest and crudest of Bierce's writings, the satirist's aptitude for detecting and exploiting the discrepancy between seeming and being is apparent. He rang endless changes on the theme of theoretical versus actual Americanism and Christianity. Particularly galling to him were the Irish laborers who, being Christians and naturalized Americans, could behave as though they were neither toward the Chinese, who really were neither but who, for this reason, were expected to act as if they were both. These are two short articles which, with variations, appeared hundreds of times in "The Town Crier," chronicling as many murders and brutalities:

> On last Sunday afternoon a Chinaman passing guilelessly along Dupont street, was assailed with a tempest of bricks and stones from the steps of the First Congregational Church. At the completion of this devotional exercise the Sunday-scholars retired within the hallowed portals of the sanctuary, to hear about Christ Jesus and him crucified. (Suffer little children to come unto me and forbid them not; for such is the kingdom of heaven.--*Old Play*.[12]

> The dead body of a Chinese woman was found last Tuesday morning lying across the sidewalk in a very uncomfortable position. The cause of her death could not be accurately ascertained, but as her head was caved in it is thought by some physicians that she died of galloping Christianity of the malignant California type.[13]

"Christian," then, can have two different and opposed meanings, but not for Bishop Simpson. Since he assumes as proven for purposes of argument that which itself needs proving, he is seen to be guilty of a massive initial *petitio principii*, to which his subsequent *post hoc ergo propter hoc* is only a corollary, and irrelevant. He is seen, due to Bierce's logical and semantic prestidigitation, to be in an even less enviable mental state than the apocryphal little boy who, having seen but one dog and one rabbit, the former chasing the latter, concluded that the latter caused the former: the Bishop's dog is hot after a chimera.

I have considered this *epiphonema* at some length because I think the wit it displays is far removed from the superficial cleverness of Bierce's earlier years. It is both integral and essentially apt. Because of these two emergent qualities I will call this present species of wit "organic" wit to distinguish it from the previous easy punning and facile irony, which were usually more ornamental than functional. This "organic" wit is functional. Its roots go back to the beginning of the passage and interpenetrate it throughout, and it comes to fruition naturally and inevitably. I think we need not ask of profound wit that it also be deep thought (Bierce's main point here is the commonplace, "Christians are usually so in name only"), but only that its application be convincing, and singularly and unexpectedly appropriate; and these two characteristics are the hallmarks of Bierce's later wit.

The following are two specimens of that wit, written sixteen years apart. The first was published in 1871, a year before Bierce left for England, and is among the dozen or so best (that is, most clearly conceived, and fully and artfully realized) attacks that he wrote for the *News-Letter*. It is an earnest of what is to come, and of what he was able to do when he struck the proper satiric balance, when Bierce the moralist did not elbow aside Bierce the craftsman. The second piece was written in 1887, during his first year on the *Examiner*, and shows how mordant and succinct he could still be when he chose, when Bierce the satirist succeeded in goading Bierce the political philosopher into specifics. Both passages suggest the incompatibility of Biercean logic and Biercean self-indulgence.

In both passages he addresses himself to the same blunder, *ignoratio elenchi*, a conclusion irrelevant to the argument that attempts to establish it (i.e. Mrs. Fair is not a murderess because her victim was ill; the Railway Commission will effect legal reforms because it is composed of men "skilled in circumvention of the law").[14] This, we may remember, was Rev. Heath's mistake too.

7.

When Laura Fair (the prototype for Twain and Warner's ill-starred heroine in *The Gilded Age*) murdered Mr. Crittenden, there followed a jurisdictional dispute, since the deed was done on a ferryboat. After it had been established that Mrs. Fair had shot her former lover in San Francisco county, Bierce merely remarked that the only thing yet to be settled was which county she had been temporarily insane in.[15] He was right: Mrs. Fair was acquitted, but not before many foolish things had been said in court by both sides. This shows the quality of the defense lawyer's reasoning and that of Bierce's:

> The counsel of the assassin, Mrs. Fair, has singular notions as to relative guilt. Mrs. Fair approached Mr. Crittenden and shot him through the heart. He lingered forty-eight hours in intolerable anguish, and died. An examination revealed a diseased state of the smaller intestines, and the prisoner's counsel has been at some pains to prove that this was the cause of death. The inference is obvious: the crime of shooting a man who is already sick unto death is merely a venial offense. This is a cheerful kind of view, but if generally adopted might prove very annoying to a man who would like to die in peace. When he should begin to feel the skeleton hand of the Great Leveler reaching for his life, and clasping him coldly about his vitals, he would have to bar and bolt the doors, or someone who might chance to have a rusty old load in his pistol would walk into the death chamber and take a pop at him just for diversion. We think it might be well to have a Medical Commission to decide when a malady is hopeless, and then the patient might be set up at a cross-roads, with a placard on his breast inviting the sportive public to practice upon the expiring carcass. It is a great deal nicer to spin a slug at a living body than at an unfeeling target, and if moribund man has no rights that the healthy are bound to respect, there is no reason why we should any longer be deprived of this cheap and pleasing recreation.[16]

This piece has a number of interesting points--including the happy choice of the adjectives "nicer" and "unfeeling" in the last sentence--but it is enough to notice in passing Bierce's clear and compelling logic: he has caught the defense in a perfect *reductio ad absurdum*, which in the last sentence is stripped of its nonessentials and recapitulated, in order to make more forcible and pointed that which has gone before. This is the trope *anacephalaeosis*, which here both follows from, and contains the essence of, the *reductio*.

> The Railway Commissioners, under the Interstate Commerce Act . . . are all lawyers--a fact which that illustrious philanthroper, Jay Gould, regards (with veneration) as a conspicuous and miraculous display of the divine beneficence. Chauncy M. Depew also has leveled his shins and knitted his fingers in praise. Possibly something better might be said of this Commission than that Messrs. Gould and Depew feel called upon to return thanks for it. If I rightly understand the purpose of its existence, these gentlemen are "a part of the thing to be reformed." Without too stubborn insistence on the parallel, it may be pointed out that the commendation of thieves is not reckoned high testimony to the efficiency of the constabulary, even in countries where thieves, from their superior numbers, speak with all the authority of public opinion.[17]

With a few seemingly bored, clipped phrases Bierce disposes of Gould and Depew, then broadens his attack to include the Interstate Commerce Commission and lawyers, and, in his *epiphonema*, the American public. The Biercean *epiphonema* evolved from the terse recapitulation into something more: this trope simultaneously compresses the meaning of that which precedes it, and adds to that meaning. It is *anacephalaeosis* with implications. The same moral climate in which Gould, Depew, and their legal counsel thrive, and which necessitated the Interstate Commerce Commission, is not likely to benefit that Commission or its sub-agencies. This is Bierce's real point in the passage just quoted, made at the close. From here, it is an easy step to epigram. The Biercean *epiphonema* enlarges the context of that which precedes it, and thereby encourages a rereading of the passage in the light of its new setting.

This final, epigrammatic, witty flourish with implications echoing back to the beginning, I take to signal the emergence of Bierce the artist. It is the imaginative analog of the by now characteristic left- and mid-branching sentences: the *hyrmos* and *parenthesis* suspend until the end the sentence's sense; the *epiphonema* suspends the final significance of the preceding sentences' total sense; and each complements and reinforces the other. I take this to be a type of Bierce's mind, this habit of thinking that depends more upon inclusion and result than upon accumulation and process. Bierce the craftsman carefully chooses his words, carefully varies and balances his phrases, clauses, and sentences; Bierce the artist and wit decides what this patiently arranged structure will finally mean.

It may be worthwhile at this point to backtrack, and try to discover how Bierce uses some of these words and patterns in the first part of the Simpson passage. The main figure is *megaloprepeia*, lofty utterance, and its purpose is to help render totally absurd the two linked *post hoc* arguments. It does this by, quite simply, applying latinate and inappropriately elevated diction to a hat. The result is bathos, and the initial logical point is rhetorically reinforced.

The other figures which compose this general *megaloprepeia* emphasize the ironic agency of the hat and its ironic importance as agent--and thus, since hat and church are bound together by hoops of bad logic, diminish the function and stature of Christianity.

*Diazeugma*, the application of many verbs to one subject, is the first of these tributary figures. In Bierce's first sentence he denies any causal relationship between Christianity and science ("It is a coincidence, your reverence"), then ironically emphasizes the existence of another such relationship with a pleonastic string of verbs: "produces, fosters, encourages, and conserves." The point of course is that both are coincidences and that to conclude otherwise on the basis of the evidence given is a mistake.

Bierce's second sentence is patterned on Bishop Simpson's first one, the two independent clauses of each being separated by a semicolon, and the similarity of the two sentences' structures reflecting the similarity of their illogic. *Chiasmus*, the inversion of one element of a parallel, is the figure used here: "hat . . . Africa; India and China . . . it." In parodying the Bishop and mimicking his evidence, Bierce lends it a stately balance and dignity that, it is by this time clear, this evidence does not deserve.

Bierce's sentences one and two form a syntactic pair: compound-complex, declarative, no-branch; and compound, declarative, no-branch, respectively. Sentences three and four make up a similar pair: compound-complex, declarative, right-branch; and complex, declarative, right-branch. This second pair, like the first, helps bring into sharper focus the parallel ideas contained in its component sentences, as well as some contrasting ones.

Within the parallel "wherever/there" frame of the third sentence's first independent clause, Bierce undercuts the stateliness of the previous two sentences with a particularly funny (it seems to me) *catachresis*, a wrenched or extravagant metaphor. The mental picture one forms from hats being planted and science taking root--the human head serving as soil in either case--is a particularly bizarre one.

Further, the parallelism in the first independent clause ("Wherever . . . hat . . . there science") introduces the antithetical parallelism in the second ("no silk hats, no science"), and makes possible the considerable foreshortening of this second clause. This is the figure *brevitas*, the workings of which were considered earlier. "Wherever there are" and "there is" are supplied by the context of the first independent clause, enabling the second to stand as Bierce's alternative to Simpson's thesis, in its tersest and most ridiculous form--the naked absurdity to which his proposition reduces itself through the first three (pat, balanced, semicolon-divided) sentences, like a scrap of paper zigzagging slowly to the ground.

Sentences three and four are further linked at their ends. Both finish in an *epergesis*, an appositive elaboration of, one, "no science," and two, "civilization." These *epergeses* constitute a final, inter-sentence antithesis made all the more pat by the highflown alliteration ("abundant benefaction") and the fatuous rhyming of the terminal appositives ("night"/"light"). The *b*-alliteration is prolonged humorously into the fifth sentence ("beacon . . . broad . . . benignity . . . blaze") and provides a setting for a second *catachresis*, the extravagant likening of a tall and shiny silk hat to a lighthouse.

The sixth sentence, as was noted, is a recapitulation of the two *post hoc* arguments. It is also a preparation for the *epiphonema*, forming with it the distinction between "profess" and "practice" that moves the argument back to a point before the beginning of the paragraph.

This passage, then, strongly contrasts with the Macpherson passage of six years earlier. This piece is saturated, unobstrusively, with logic (the explicit *post hoc* constituting a *reductio*, constituting in turn a refutation of the implicit *petitio*), and the logic lends it power and concision--power because the argument is unanswerable, and concision, because much of the argument takes place off the page, as proper inferences by the reader. Further, the figures complement this rational substructure. From the general *megaloprepeia* to the minute and particular instances of alliteration, the figures permit excision of some words and effectively emphasize those remaining by relating them to the point being made, and by so relating the handful of tropes.

In short, semantics and syntactics are working to their mutual benefit, yielding prime Biercean wit, and providing us with a paradigm for his own description: "With stabs ["Your reverence's theory (grotesque as it is)"], begs pardon ["has this value"]--and turns the weapon in the wound ["It has not yet been observed that they practice it."]."

# NOTES

[1] *s.v.* "Editorial Fine Frenzies," *Nuggets and Dust* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1873), pp. 89-90.

[2] Several times, in his search for an absolutely safe satiric target, he attacked himself--the other columns written for London journals, and his old *News-Letter* columns. The passage below, however, if it began as an attack, ended as a definite puff of his earlier work. This wistful piece appears in his "Town Crier" column (*Figaro*, 4 April 1874), just opposite his passage on Rev. Heath, and it suggests that he was perhaps not yet fully at ease in his newly acquired cosmopolitanism--or, to put it more simply, that he was a bit homesick:

> Not content with his weekly *vendetta,* in which some hapless rival goes to the wall and is nailed fast, the editor of the *San Francisco News Letter* loves to occasionally turn back and enjoy the sufferings of some victim writhing on the cold iron of a former retribution. He has done so in the case of a local contemporary called the *Bulletin,* of which it seems he once expressed the opinion following. "This journal, therefore, born in bankruptcy, swaddled in slander, fostered in venality, fanned by excitement--whose praises are as blistering as the cancerous kisses of the crocodile which swelters in Nilotic mud--this slimy sheet, we pronounce it, and we care not if we stand alone in condemnation, is a fraud and a cheat, a delusion and a curse to this community." "That," adds the *News Letter,* "was our opinion in '57. The years that have rolled by since then have served only to strengthen it." Of course it is not easy to understand how the lapse of any number of years can add new strength to an opinion originally so strong; but I suspect the editor, being on the spot, knows his own mind better than anyone at this distance can know it for him; and if he were to assert that his feeling for his unhappy neighbor amounted to actual dislike, I, for one, should unhesitatingly believe him. At least if I did not I should take precious good care not to let him know it.
>
> I love frankness quite as much as anyone, but there are certain opinions which, should it ever be my lot to entertain them, will flourish unspoken and perish unrecorded. Amongst these I give the place of honor to all opinions adverse to the *San Francisco News Letter,* its friends, its policy, the friends of its policy, and the policy of its friends. Should Fortune over afflict me with a disbelief in any of these things, I pray she may bestow the gift of dumbness, with prudence to direct it. But I can hardly imagine myself disagreeing with that amusing journal.

[3] These first appeared in *Fun*, were then collected and reprinted as *Cobwebs* (London: *Fun* Office, 1873), were reprinted as *Cobwebs from an Empty Skull* (London: Routledge, 1874).

[4] *The Figaro*, 4 April 1874.

[5] Tufte, pp. 149-50.

[6] *Argonaut*, 26 May 1877.

[7] *Wasp*, 26 August 1882.

[8] Follett, p. 287. He considers Bierce's mastery of understatement and of the "rhetorical crescendo" to be his two distinguishing stylistic traits.

[9] For example, ten years earlier he would almost certainly have seen what he could do with "Hemphill" and "Golgotha."

[10] *Shapes of Clay*, *Works*, IV, 229.

[11] "The Opinionator," *Works*, X, 63.

[12] *News-Letter*, 7 August 1869.

[13] *News-Letter*, 8 October 1870.

[14] Cf. "Lawyer," *The Devil's Dictionary*, *Works*, VII.

[15] *News-Letter*, 25 February 1871.

[16] *News-Letter*, 15 April 1871.

[17] *Examiner*, 27 March 1887.

## CHAPTER THREE: THE *WASP* AND THE *EXAMINER*

### 1. 1883

1 Some old hens in Oakland who are running a kind of
charity circus called, I believe, the Woman's Sheltering Home
conceived the notion of having a "benefit," and a he hen named
Horton who paces the quarter-deck of a Presbyterian preach-house
stood in to assist them. 2 They engaged the services of Mrs.
Laura Dainty, the modest and clever little elocutionist, who gave
in admirable taste some well chosen readings in prose and verse.
3 Their coffers being duly replenished by the usual secular
methods of ticket-selling and advertising on the programmes, the
hens bethought them to be scandalized by the worldly nature of the
show. 4 Having in mind their own spindling shins they recollected
with disapproval the brevity of the reader's costume. 5 They recalled
the circumstance that in one place in her part she had
knelt, as the spirit of the piece required, thus making the house
o' God a wicked, wicked theater--which the admission fees and the
advertising programmes didn't make it. 6 Hen Horton uprolled his
heavenly eyes, pulled down his chin and shook a deprecating pate.
7 The juiceless and old virgins and dowdy dames of the Sweltering
Home bobbed their frizzy pows, unleashed their tongues and executed
a spirited chorus of ain't-she-awfuls! 8 Then the Horton person
headed the procession of Antiques and Horribles and steered them to
the nearest newspaper office, where they cackled a public repudiation
of the gifted little wordling out of whose skull they had
scooped abundant dollars. 9 It is a trivial incident, but it
illustrates in a marked way the melancholy truth that Barbarism's
ultimate parapet is the white choker of a parson, and its last
ditch the heart of a "truly pious" woman. 10 The fibrous virgins
and flabby matrons of the Home may have sinned in this matter for
lack of light, but the Rev. Mr. Horton is evidently no lady.

This passage, published on September 1, is one of the more elaborate yet considered. Except for the last two sentences, it is an *apologue*, a story told to illustrate a point. But it is a variant of the more usual *apologue*, the fable, in which nonhumans behave as humans; instead, humans are portrayed behaving outwardly as animals, but motivated by a genteel Victorian Christianity, the former presumably an objective correlative of the latter. Bierce the moralist is speaking here.

The two most noticeable devices used are the figure *alliteration*, seen throughout the piece, and the trope *tapinosis*, also seen throughout. These are often combined ("he hen named Horton," "dowdy dames," "fibrous virgins and flabby matrons"), and it is this conjunction that contributes most to the passage's tone of amused contempt. Bierce uses here several *tapinosis* variants as well. "Charity circus," for example, is an instance of *meiosis*, the application of a degrading epithet; "Hen Horton" an instance of *prosonomasia*, a derisive nickname; "Sweltering Home" an instance of *agnominatio*, a play on a word's sound.*

There is nothing subtle about these devices. The irony is similarly broad. After the two introductory sentences there are two triads of sentences, the first (numbers three, four, and five) dealing with the women's imputed motives, and the second (six, seven, and eight) with the resultant actions. Sentences three, four, and five achieve their effects by pairing key words in both their halves ("secular . . . worldly," "spindling shins . . . brevity of the reader's costume,"

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*If, however, something more were known of this Home--if, for example, it had been a workhouse or sweatshop--then the figure would become the trope *paronomasia*, a play on a word's sense, for the informed reader.

"wicked theater . . . admission fees and advertising programmes"). Sentences three and four are joined by virtue of their similar structure: both are simple declaratives and both branch to the left (sentence three with a nominative absolute, sentence four with a participial phrase), and this left branch bears the first pair of key terms in each. Sentences four and five tend to form a unit because of the similarity of their main verbs ("recollected," "recalled").

Sentences six and seven, like sentences three and four in the preceding group of three, have their similarities of content reflected in similarities of structure: they are both simple declarative sentences with no branching, and each has a triple verb ("uprolled . . . pulled . . . shook," "bobbed . . . unleashed . . . executed"). Sentence eight, the last in the *apologúe*, is, like sentence five, a complex declarative sentence, and like sentence five provides a resolution of the preceding two sentences. Sentences nine and ten end the piece, both having their independent clauses joined by the co-ordinating conjunction "but."

The structure, then--and it seems clear that it is a syntactically tight one--for the passage is this: sentences one through eight form the *apologue*, the first two being the introduction and the next three giving the putative reasons for the actions described in the three following; sentence nine contains the moral ("It is a trivial incident, but it illustrates [i.e., *hic fabula docet*] the melancholy truth that . . ."); and the last sentence is the comment, in the form of an *epiphonema*.

Functioning within this pattern are two fairly unobtrusive but interesting items which deserve mention. Like the characteristic final flash of implication-heavy wit, discussed earlier, Bierce's increasing use of and skill in the use of two tropes seem to mark the emergence of something more than a competent word-chooser and sentence-maker. The two are *hypotyposis*, mimicry of acts, and *synecdoche*, figuratively taking the part for the whole or the whole for the part. Like the *epiphonema* also, these tropes were becoming typically Biercean--that is, they were becoming important components of his style at this time.

The time is eighteen years to the month since he made the entries in his Civil War journal which began this essay. Few would argue that his style has not improved so much as to be transformed. But, lamentable as these entries are, they have one redeeming feature, and that is a nascent vividness. His treatment, for example, of the battle between vulture and crone transcends somewhat the unfortunate language in which it is written. Here is an intervening instance of vividness, written six years after the Panama journal and twelve years before the Hen Horton passage; it is from the 3 June 1871 edition of the *News-Letter:*

> Look at that man's face. Look at his face! Such an eye would reflect credit upon a dead fish--but would not reflect the fish. That nose: beery! Those lips: swollen, and knobby along the edges. Complexion, salmon and pimply, with clumps of little congested veins, like rootlets making a network under the skin. Whom have we here? Nobody but a short-hair ward politician, glaring glassily about him for a chance to steal something. He has lately been organized into a club, and is a nucleus for "the party," upon which he has preyed so long that he thinks it is he--as a mutton-eater is said to bleat and sprout wool. He pervades Collins' drinking saloon where he leaves his name oftener than his money, and the odor of stale tobacco smoke oftener than either. Here he makes up the slate, and compels the barkeeper to make up another. Sometimes he strays as far as the "Mint" or the "Bank Exchange," but only by invitation: his rule is, "bit drinks for your friends and two-bit drinks with 'em." He is now betting politics and making somebody Governor. See the rascal swell his neck and protrude his paunch, laden with free lunches! O, hang him! . . .

There are traces of *hypotyposis* here (we see the subject "glaring glassily", we see him "swell his neck and protrude his paunch"); and one might make a case for *synecdoche* as well, understanding it in its alternate sense of taking the genus for the species or vice versa (the ward hack thinks he is the party and the party is himself). But the dominant trope in this sketch is *effictio*, a head-to-toe description--although it is far from the usual *effictio*, the blazon, in which the Renaissance poet inventories the charms of his mistress. My point here is that Bierce's attention to detail enables us to visualize those details and thus construct a mental image (as far as the waist, where Bierce loses patience) of this rather repulsive subject. Thus his objections to political parasitism become more cogent because he can point to an embodiment of the vice.

His ability to evoke pictures in his readers' minds eventually became one of the idiosyncrasies that marked a passage as being his. One of the ways this ability manifested itself in print is the trope *hypotyposis:* besides the previously noted linking function of sentences six and seven in the Hen Horton passage, the multiple verbs in these sentences have another function, and that is to convey the sense of considerable activity and to do this in a very brief space. Having "bethought them," "recollected," and "recalled," the "hens" and the "he hen" acted on this cogitation: they "uprolled," "pulled," "shook," "bobbed," "unleashed," and "executed." Thus the figure *diazeugma* (several verbs for one subject) has as its effect the trope *hypotyposis*. The actions mimicked are pantomimes of masculine hypocrisy and feminine vindictiveness. These actions, with all the head movement described, also strongly suggest an assemblage of irritated domestic fowl. In this way the conceit is maintained and the actors are seen as at once humanly disagreeable and nonhumanly comic and negligible. The fable ends appropriately with the image of the principals deployed like a string of chicks behind a mother hen, cackling their ingratitude.

The "hens" perform one action that is more metaphorical than the rest: they scoop dollars from Mrs. Dainty's skull--a typical Biercean *synecdoche*. Eyes, heads, tongues, hands, and stomachs became and remained parts of his iconography, enabling him to make his points with considerable terseness and concreteness, and therefore power. For example, in discussing the author-publisher relationship Bierce noted that in their efforts to put their heads into their bellies (that is, to live by their craft), writers most often simply furnished their skulls as goblets from which the publishers sipped fine wine.[1] Similarly, he contended that tariff debates were useless because on such occasions the tongue always spoke from the pocket.[2] Again, during the funding bill debate of 1896 he depicted C. P. Huntington as removing his hands from everyone's pockets long enough to be sworn in.* Also, many of his epigrams incorporate and benefit from this synecdochic compression: "Thought and emotion dwell apart. When the heart goes into the head there is no dissention; only an eviction."[3]; "Wearing his eyes in his heart, the optimist falls over his own feet, and calls it Progress."[4]

These, then, are the recurrent Biercean images: the head and the heart incessantly warring, the belly and purse bounding terrible vacuums, the tongue inexhaustible and with a demonic life of its own, the eyes forever independent, one trained on heaven and the other on the main chance, the hand forever groping in strange pockets, performing what Mencken called "silent, prehensile deeds." One of Bierce's definitions, quoted earlier, styles the speaker of slang as "one who utters with his tongue that which he thinks with his ear"; and another explains that the trite popular saying known as a saw is "so called because it makes its way into a wooden head."[5]

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*This is a wittier remark than it might at first appear, if one remembers that Huntington was at this time king of the western railroads and these were invariably portrayed by their enemies as octopi.

The advantages to Bierce's style are readily apparent. This technique transforms abstract nouns and ideas into concrete ones, his terse manner of expression becomes more so, and the passage's "density" is increased by a real though incalculable amount. "Out of whose skull they had scooped abundant dollars" is certainly preferable, in terms of force and immediacy, to "whose talent and intelligence they had profitably exploited"--or any other paraphrase that I can think of. And this use of *synecdoche* has as its effect here two other devices which taken together form the essence of Bierce's style: *enargia*, literary vividness and distinctness, and *brevitas*, concise expression. Both these, plus the *sk*-alliteration and a characteristic Biercean grimness, are at work in this the fable's last arresting image--a skull full of coins, being plundered. The image contains Bierce's charge against the "hens"; it is a symbol for the particularly distasteful form of acquisition which Thorstein Veblen was to document so carefully in *Theory of the Leisure Class*, sixteen years later.

## 2. 1884

Slang was not as abhorrent to Bierce as he said it was. True, he called it "a foul pool at which every dunce fills his bucket, and then sets up as a fountain."[6] And it is true that he reviled those writers, notably dialect humorists, whose stock-in-trade was slang, and that he chose to do so in icily correct English. But by the mid-1880's there were few specialized vocabularies that he could not adapt to his purposes if he chose to do so, slang included. His objection to the dialect and slang writers was that they confused these bastard forms with humor itself, his point being that diction alone is too frail a reed to support anything as weighty as true humor.

But although substandard speech cannot be humor, it can certainly in the right hands be humorous. When Bierce used slang at this point in his career it tended to be, like his wit and his abrupt reversals of direction, "organic"--a term that I have used to suggest profundity of a kind, and inevitability. The test of this organic rightness is the way it resonates, the way it causes the other elements of the passage--semantic, associational, lexical, syntactic, logical, rhetorical--to vibrate with new meaning or previously hidden relevance to the passage as a whole. Another way of approaching this point is to say that an organically right element sheds light on the interdependencies among the other elements in a passage. And if these elements are seen and felt to be somehow consistent, and if they contribute to a point or denouement or implication that is seen to be somehow significant, either on its own or in a larger context, then it may be helpful to refer to a passage so constructed as having a high "specific gravity," or as being "dense," or closely "woven"; such a passage would thereby tend to be marked off from those more loosely or carelessly structured in which the author seems to have given much more thought to what is ahead than to what is already written.

George Ade, for example, strikes me as one such careless writer. His *Fables in Slang* were a great popular success. Basically, they are mundane observations on the petit bourgeois verities tricked out in now-outworn slang--a sort of "Gasoline Alley" without pictures. The point to each is banal, the irony broad and simple, and the humor superficial. Their appeal seems to have been the diction in which they are couched, and this probably explains their obscurity, in both senses of the word, today. *Fables in Slang* made Ade famous and moderately wealthy; Bierce's *Fantastic Fables* did neither of these things for him, perhaps because they had not the necessary gimmick. True to form, Bierce expressed his dislike for Ade's books and for slang in general; although, as we shall see, he understood slang's potential at least as well as Ade did:

> 1 What, parsons! will ye not come forward with an offering of filthy lucre for redemption of God's elect? 2 Will ye suffer the secular wolf to invade the fold and throttle the shepherd? 3 Shall that truly good man, the Rev. Dr. Morrison (for that he did thoughtlessly fleece his flock of Chosen Friends, thinking no harm and meaning it for the edification of their souls), be held in jail along with malefactors who love not the light and are unacquainted with grace? 4 Go down, O clergy, into your pockets and emerge with bail for the unhappy brother persecuted by the law. 5 Behold how the cave-bat hangeth together in festoons, and the hibernating blacksnake conglobeth himself into multicapital complexity against the serpencidal cold. 6 If ye will not stand by one another as children of light, then do so as reptiles. 7 So shall the interpugnant traditions of the cloth be preserved, yet luckless brethren delivered out of the hand of the wicked. 8 For is [it] not written--II Jewhillikins, ixl, 3: "He that standeth not in save he get a divvy, upon him shall the kibosh be put when himself nippeth?"

Bierce begins this burlesque sermon, published in the *Wasp* on November 15, with an *ecphonesis* or exclamation ("What, parsons!") then embarks on a series of reproachful questions (*epiplexis*) in sentences one through three, the climax of the series coming in sentence three. The first two sentences have the structure simple, interrogative, no-branch; the third is a complex interrogative with a mid-branch. This mid-branch constitutes the climax's interpolated anti-climax and contains the central pun of the passage, "fleece."

He was beginning to give his key terms increased attention at about this time. Here is a piece, published two years earlier, in which the wordplay is less complex and subtle than in the Morrison passage, but still interesting (I have italicized the cognates of *lux*, *creditus*, and *veritas*, in lieu of comment):

> A few months ago a *truthful* parson named Simonds, at that time pastor of the Powell-street Methodist Church in this city, related that he had been instantly cured of a painful and perilous disorder by Jesus Christ, who personally and visibly performed an operation on him at his residence. This *scrupulously exact* old man being but imperfectly *believed* by the wicked was variously crucified by them. The newspapers gave him to drink of hyssop and vinegar, thrust a spear into his side, parted his cloak of religion among them and cast lots (of mud) upon his vesture. But he prayed that they be forgiven, for they knew not--and appeared not greatly to care--what they did. It was not the first time that a good man had been made to suffer for telling the *truth*, and I hope it will not be the last.
>
> He is gone to his rest now--that good old man is out of the pulpit that was once *illuminated* by the sharp, dry *light* of his veracity, and the Rev. Mr. Gober *shines* in his stead. The saintly Gober piously adheres to the traditions of his preach-box by a chill and strenuous loyalty to the *truth* as it was in Simonds. He *avers* that miracles of healing are as plentiful to-day as ever they were, and I *believe* him. He *declares* that disease can be cured by faith and supplication--by the elders of the church praying over the patient and greasing him in the name of the Lord. This I know to be *true*, for I once recovered from rheumatism while the elders of the various churches were mentioning my case in their prayers and a pious layman was anointing me with oil. *True*, the oil had a lively odor of arnica, and the elders were praying that I would die.[7]

This verbal amusement is nearly pronounced enough to constitute the figure *epimone*, a refrain. In the Morrison passage, by contrast, there is less wordplay. But, within the patterns dictated by the form of the piece (a burlesque sermon), and by its internal logic, such ordered punning as there is helps, materially, to make and reinforce the passage's main point. The punning here is not simply variations on an initially stated, ironic theme.

"Fleece" denotes a proper activity for shepherds and connotes a highly improper one for ministers; it can be taken as both a standard scriptural word and as a standard term in criminal slang. It functions, then, as a nexus from which the passage's presentation of illusion (the pastor as traditional repository of confidence) and reality (this seemingly representative--he is "unhappy" and "luckless" and a "brother"--latter-day pastor as confidence man) diverge and go their separate ways to converge in the final word "nippeth." From "fleece," the illusion is emphasized by the archaic, biblical, and latinate diction and cadences; and the reality--Bierce's version--is emphasized by the slang. And the sermon itself becomes an exhortation to, not virtue, but expediency.

The third sentence ends in a particularly deft application of *adianoeta*, a calculated ambiguity. It is uncertain whether the sermonizing persona's objection is to malefactors in general or only to the particular kind that, unlike Dr. Morrison, "love not the light and are unacquainted with grace"--thus exempting from censure good-loving (that is, clerical) evildoers, as opposed to those who don't know any better. The absence of a comma after "malefactors" suggests the latter interpretation, and with it a novel sliding scale of responsibility in which blameworthiness lessens as awareness of culpability increases. A corollary of this is that virtue consists less in consequence and intention than in profession: a clergyman is good by definition. And we are thus confronted with the paradox of the good evildoer--only a seeming paradox since it rests on an obvious fallacy, that of affirming the consequent:

If a man is virtuous he is clerical material;
He is clerical material--in fact, he is a minister;
Therefore, he is virtuous.

Stated this way the mistake is readily apparent: appropriate qualities other than and perhaps antagonistic to virtue are not excluded. And this is the fallacy that (I think) lies buried in this passage, providing its logical impetus--a fallacy that Bierce felt lay buried as deeply in the American mind: a confusion of accident and essence. (His earlier distinction, for example, made between "profess" and "practice" in the Bishop Simpson passage is one attempt, of hundreds, to dispel this confusion.)

This fallacy is not stated in the passage, nor is the dilemma stated, the resolution of which is the recognition of the fallacy as such. But the dilemma is certainly implied: Morrison is one of God's elect, a shepherd, a truly good man, a malefactor, an unhappy brother, and one of the luckless brethren; his adversary is the secular wolf, the law, the wicked; his hope lies in redemption, which turns out to be bail money. The minions of light and dark are confused, and purposely so. The persona tends to define evil as nonclerical, but the irony and the ending of the piece point to Bierce's definition of evil as, in this case, illegal.

The dilemma, then, and the logical blunder that gives rise to it are not stated but are felt by the reader due to the contradictory descriptions of the antagonists. This is enough, in a passage that is amused in tone and jocular in treatment; further explicitness would weigh on such a jeu d'esprit, pushing it toward the didactic essay, and thus mar the passage, conceived as it is mostly in fun. This is more than enough for Bierce's contemporary readers who, having been schooled in his peculiar anti-illusionism for sixteen years, would, I think, have quickly intuited his central incongruity.

To return to the point: there isn't such a transvaluation of values by which guilt varies inversely with knowledge of good and evil. Since standard ethics work in just the opposite way, it follows that Dr. Morrison is guiltier than his cellmates with similar proclivities, and that perhaps he should be removed from their midst. But if so, the removal would be for their good, not his. That is the implication.

The fourth sentence is an example of the trope *protrope*, an adjuration reinforced by threat or promise. The secularity of the sermon is underscored by this trope in the sentence's first prepositional phrase: instead of the traditional "onto your knees," it reads, "into your pockets." And the desired goal is bail money, the "redemption" in the first sentence. Bierce proceeds in good sermon tradition to reinforce his point by the trope *apodixis*, confirmation by reference to experience ("Behold how the cave-bat hangeth together . . ."). He then makes the reference more absurd than it inherently is by strewing it with overly emphatic alliteration ("conglobeth . . . multicapital complexity . . . cold"), and bizarre latinate neologisms ("conglobeth . . . multicapital . . . serpencidal"). This latter, affected diction comprising Latin words or inkhorn terms, is a form of *cacozelia*, and was becoming a Bierce specialty about this time.[8] The sixth sentence makes explicit the analogy implicit in sentence five.

Besides the traditional *ecphonesis*, *epiplexis*, *protrope*, and *apodixis* of the sermon form he is burlesquing, Bierce includes two other tropes common to the *genre* and closes the burlesque with them. They are *apomnemonysis*, the quotation of an approved authority ("For is it not written . . ."), and, in it, *cataplexis*, the threat of punishment, misfortune, or disaster. The interesting thing about these tropes is their diction, the fact that they are couched in *barbaralexis*, slang, and not ordinary slang but that of the underworld.

As I noted earlier, "fleece" as it is used here is the central pun of the passage. Its most obvious meaning, "to shear," is an ancient stockman's term. Also, since at least the early seventeenth century, "fleece" has meant to petty thieves both a purse and the act of separating it from its owner. And this is probably the origin of the almost equally old underworld and commercial meaning of "to swindle."[9]

"Divvy" is similarly a noun and a verb. A criminal slang term of the late nineteenth century, it meant both to share and a share of the plunder.[10]

In mid-nineteenth century "stand in" meant to take part in some illegal activity. This meaning gradually broadened so that by the turn of the century or slightly before, it had come to mean participation generally.[11]

To "put the kibosh on" meant, in mid and late nineteenth century, to silence or to stop a person.[12] "Nip" has two main meanings, both of which are possible in this passage. It has meant, since the late sixteenth century, both a cutpurse and his characteristic activity. "Nip" in its other sense means to arrest (not "to be arrested"). This sense of the word has been around even longer than the first, since at least the middle of the sixteenth century.[13]

Technically, the final part of the last sentence should read "nippeth and is nipped," if the idea of being arrested for theft and incarcerated is to be explicitly conveyed. But perhaps Bierce felt that the context supplied this meaning sufficiently and that by confining himself to the form denoting purse-cutting he emphasized it, and thus made his point about the nature of Morrison's offense more forcibly.

Whatever Bierce may have felt, we are confronted with a complex instance of *paronomasia* in this, the last word of the passage. The pun is sunk in archaized *barbaralexis* and is difficult to understand. Perhaps Bierce made it unconsciously. An indication that he did not, that this was a conscious choice on his part, is his considerable and growing fondness for the final, witty, meaning-laden finishing touch. Another indication that Bierce knew what he was doing, this one structural, lies in the function of the word "nip": it bears the same relation to the prior "thoughtlessly fleece" as does "bail" to "redemption"--the comic deflation of a euphemism. Also, besides clarifying "thoughtlessly fleece," "nip" echoes the criminal meaning of "fleece," purse-snatching. Thus the Rev. Morrison and his like-minded colleagues cut purses or steal them, but in either case get away with the money, and are in either case likely to be thrown in jail for their pains, hopefully to be rescued by their more fortunate or careful brethren.

For anyone who clearly understood it this obscure and complex quasi-pun would have constituted an *epiphonema*: it comprises in the narrow compass of the word "nippeth" both the crime and the result, and both archaism and barbarism which in turn reflect illusion and reality, respectively, as they are depicted in the passage. The word also has roots in the beginning of the paragraph, referring back to "fleece," elaborating on it, and clinching the main point that organized religion can be seen as a confidence game which can in turn be seen as simple purse-snatching, since (and this point is made, obliquely, in the *adianoeta*) the morality of confidence games is no better than that of candid theft.

This passage shows Bierce at the top of his journalistic form, able to select the precisely right word from a vast and varied vocabulary. It also shows him becoming almost too smart for his own good, if all the connotations and reverberations of his final pun were consciously taken into account, since the subtleties involved would surely escape most readers. And as he was a competent amateur philologist and meticulous craftsman who stressed--harped on--the importance of the right word, there is reason to believe that these minutiae of his, many of them, were intentional. For example, here is Bierce on the primacy of precision in "The Matter of Manner" (*Works*, X, 59): "We think in words; we cannot think without them. Shallowness or obscurity of speech means shallowness or obscurity of thought." This is an application of the dictum (*Wasp*, 17 Feburary 1883):

> The other day, in fulfillment of a promise, I took a random page of [Howells'] work and in twenty minutes had marked forty solecisms --instances of the use of words without a sense of their importance or a knowledge of their meaning--the substitution of a word that he did not want for a word that he did not think of. Confusion of thought leads to obscurity of expression. . . . Words are the mechanism of thought. The master knows his machine, and precision is nine parts of style. This fellow Howells thinks into the hopper and the mangled thought comes out all over his cranky apparatus in gobs and splashes of expression. . . .

We may agree with him that the right word is crucial, but still, I think, have reservations about that perfect but ultra-esoteric word "nippeth." If the broad outlines of his argument were not obvious to almost anyone, this particular *epiphonema* would surely convict him of the hated satiric "delicacy."

## 3. 1885

> 1 I am but mildly enamored of the clergy and only indifferently impressed with respect for people who wish to flood my lower levels with cold water when I am not on fire; but when I see in the dispatches that a teetotaling parson ended a debate the other day in New York by leveling a revolver at his opponent and commanding him to retract all that he had said against preachers and prohibitionists I am compelled to admit that even a sky-pilot and lake-dweller may institute reforms in controversy. 2 The arguments usually employed to prove the superior excellence of soulsmiths and the phylloxera are only temperately intelligible, but anybody can understand the simple and direct reasoning of a cocked revolver. 3 If runners for the house not made with hands and advocates of the bounding billow will adopt this forthright means of spreading the light it will greatly simplify the methods of debate, and, for my part, I would rather have my brains blown out with gunpowder than tangled with spun bosh. 4 Firearms fitly charged and suitably directed ought to inspire a lively respect for the clergy and a profound reverence for the sink of the Humboldt river.

This passage, published on Feburary 28 in the *Wasp*, is a reply to an extreme instance of an *argumentum ad baculum*, an appeal to force--"the simple and direct reasoning of a cocked revolver." It is a terse little paragraph, tightly meshed and interconnected, in three parts.

The first three sentences have the structure compound-complex, declarative, no-branch. The first sentence is an introduction, the second and third are an elaboration, and the fourth is the concluding comment. The second and third sentences, besides having the same basic structure, also have a long dependent clause near the front of the first independent clause of each, and a coordinating conjunction to begin the second independent clause. By virtue of these similarities the two tend to group together into a syntactic unit. The fourth sentence is shorter, having the structure simple, declarative, no-branch; like the third it ends in a pair of prepositional phrases.

This is the basic syntactic structure, an unobtrusive *isocolon*. More interesting is the way in which subordinate figures and tropes work within this governing figure. Speaking generally, the rhetorical mechanism consists of overstatement played off against understatement. The *litotes* comprises a string of adverbs and adjectives grading from weak to strong: "mildly . . . indifferently . . . temperately . . . forthright . . . lively . . . profound." Contrasted with these positive-seeming modifiers is an opposite, negative trope difficult to isolate and identify because composed of at least three other tributary devices.

The first such component device, *alliteration*, is obvious and fairly superficial. It runs through the first three sentences ("mildly enamored," "lower levels," "bounding billow," etc.) and helps to emphasize the humorousness of the two less obvious but more integral complementary tropes, *meiosis* and *catachresis*.

*Meiosis*, the application of a degrading epithet, is seen in the first three sentences ("sky-pilot," "lake-dweller," "soulsmiths," etc.), and some of these degrading metaphors are so far-fetched as to constitute the trope *catachresis*--"phylloxera," for example, a vine pest. These three together--*alliteration, meiosis,* and *catachresis*--constitute the typically Biercean trope *synonymia*, amplification by the use of synonyms.

The trope as it is used here is very mild. In many other instances of its use Bierce conveys the impression that he would have preferred candid physical assault. In the Appendix of his *The Power of Satire* Robert C. Elliott contends that the curse was the original of vows, prayer, and the law, as well as of satire. He cites as evidence certain *defixiones* tablets upon which primitive peoples inscribed the names of enemies, then buried the tablets, hoping, presumably, for the worst (pp. 285-292, esp. p. 287).

Elliott's point is that for such people, and to a considerable extent, the name was the man. Throughout Bierce's career, especially when his anger seems to have mastered him, his satire is deeply colored by this putative origin of all satire, the curse. Accordingly, we find him attempting--sometimes frantically--to *name* his enemy; these attempts take the form of a string of synonyms or degrading epithets. He was aware of this tendency and makes fun of it and of himself, but sporadically for forty years he used the formula "this . . . this . . . this" in an effort to encompass his victim, to define him with an epithet "atrociously apt and exquisitely diabolical," and to pin that victim down. In some of the more choleric passages one can almost see an indignantly trembling forefinger, pointing. This example, a typical one, is taken from the 23 September 1881 edition of the *Wasp;* he is in the middle of a diatribe against Brother J. B. Roberts, a Presbyterian dogmatist.

> This mostrous [sic] malefactor; this trained church-hog turning up with the plowshare of his hard face the venerable leaf-mold of forgotten systems for truffles of hersey; this incalculable savage alurk in jungles or still-hunting in moccasins for the reputations of women; this incarnate bad smell tiptoeing gingerly to circumvent averted noses; this malarium from catacombs of dead-and-damned creed; this pestilence that walketh at noonday; this theological Guiteau reveling in the unheavenly pride of his discreditable identify; this Roberts!--has prevailed in his stink-pot warfare against the centuries and defiled his era. His polluted finger has smeared the semblance of an arrested shadow upon the dial of civilization. He has caused a counter-current in the river of time, and in the little eddy that he fouls with his unwholesome carcass he enjoys the blessed consciousness that the swirl is due to the back-strokes of his own tail. I hope--I do fervently trust the wretch feels better--than he looks.

This is name-calling, but with a pattern: the epithets work with the alliteration, and within the *isocolon* and *anaphora*, to give the intended bludgeoning effect. The obvious problem here is that wrathful phrases and clauses cannot be thrown out like cantilevers indefinitely: sooner or later they must reach a vertical support (that is, they must demonstrate pertinence to some logical substructure) or sag to the ground. This ornate acrimony is not greatly preferable to his earliest untrammeled abuse: figures are not much good if they defeat their own purpose, by weakening the tropes they contain, and thus nullify the passage.

In the *ad baculum* rebuttal, however, the epithets are not out of place. They complement the understatement, and these two together provide the nonchalant tone the argument requires: flaws in "the reasoning of a cocked revolver" are not the sort which need or bear much explication. The light touch is required, and it is the light touch Bierce provides.

Two other ancillary tropes in this first part of the passage are *paronomasia*, and *parelcon*, the use of two words where only one would normally stand. The pleonasm "superior excellence" constitutes this latter trope, the purpose of which is to emphasize by contrast the *meiotic* epithets immediately following. The pun, "temperately," is of a kind that Bierce had begun to favor some years back, a subtle kind that plays on a word's connotations as well as its denotations. "Temperately," being the wrong adjective for "intelligible," its cognate, "temperance," is therefore suggested and this alternative is reinforced by the context, thus reinforcing in turn the implication that the restraint of such people is limited to the areas of coherence and reason. "Profound" is another such "submerged" pun. Appearing third in the series of three adjectives, its position corresponds to "temperately," the first such pun, which occurs third in the prior series of three adverbs. "Profound" here yokes by violence its meanings of figurative and literal deepness, playing its literal sense off against the latent verbal force of the following noun "sink."

Bierce's final sentence, an *epiphonema*, is as involved as his punning. He ends the transparently ironic balance between *litotes* and *meiosis*, and closes the first part of the passage with an instance of *parrhesia*, frank speech, at the end of sentence three: religio-prohibitionist arguments are "spun bosh."[14] The word "respect," appearing in the first sentence, is repeated in the last, thus bracketing the passage with this key term. But the second "respect" clearly has a meaning different from the first, and because it has, constitutes the trope *ploce*, noticed earlier as one to which Bierce was partial. But this difference in signification is not made explicit; the meaning of the second "respect" is left slightly ambiguous, and thus both *ploce* and *adianoeta*, deliberate equivocation, contribute to the meaning and the effect of this word. The second "respect" *can* mean, along with the first, "esteem." If so, the repetition is merely that, and coincidental; and *ploce* is ruled out. But the adjective "lively" points the other way, to a meaning closer to "wary aversion." The *non sequitur* of "respect" in the first sense being evoked by a threat with a deadly weapon also suggests the second sense as being the one intended. Both these tropes have been earlier noted as being favorites with Bierce, and he here uses them to good effect. The combination of the two allows him to maintain (except for the break signalled by "bosh") his broad irony to the end, by virtue of the ambiguity of *adianoeta*; and at the same time clearly convey the difference between what the gun-toting parson should be, and what he is, by virtue of the inherent distinction-drawing quality of *ploce.*

There is one more Biercean fillip to this *epiphonema*: "clergy," like "respect," appears twice, in the first and last sentences, bracketing all the *meiotic* synonyms. The second "clergy" means what the first meant, and thus constitutes an instance of, not *ploce*, but *conduplicatio*, simple repetition with intervening words or clauses. This figure's effect is one of contrast. Reversion to the proper and dignified term helps to justify the preceding undignified ones by subtly reinforcing what occasioned them: the disparity (implicit in, and elaborated within, the *ploce*) between the ideal and the real.

The point to the passage, driven home by Bierce's choice of the word "sink" (i.e., sewer), is that the parson having enacted the *non sequitur* of "respect" in the first sense somehow following a threat of murder, has raised the possibility in Bierce's mind that ministers and prohibitionists, instead of being merely obnoxious may be noxious, worthy of "respect" in the second sense and thus furnish even stronger reasons for their avoidance.

## 4. 1887

> 1 The holy men constituting, under Providence, the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church have been experiencing throes of concern. 2 For it appeared that the United Presbyterians of Keokuk, Iowa were sundered in spirit as by the opening of the earth, and the cause of the split was an organ, at the use whereof the congregation did most vigorously kick, affirming the sinful character of instrumental music. 3 But the good pastor, having in mind the shawms and sacbuts of the chosen people and the harps of the angels, would nowise abate his will in the matter, and apprised the calcitrants of his intention to tickle their ears how he liked. 4 Wherefore they appealed to the sky-pilots of the General Assembly. 5 Straightway ensued the Rev. D. S. McHenry of San Francisco, who mounted the feet of him and sturdily assailed the organ. 6 He flashed his fists across the keyboard, as it were, engendering wails and screams of instrumental pain; he pulled out all the stops and flung them in the face of

> the younger and wickeder generation. 7 He hurled himself headwise and ramly at the reeds, and danced upon the bellows and made them squawk it. 8 In brief, it was the reverend gentleman's opinion that organs "is pizen". . . .

This final example of Bierce's journalism, written at the mid-point of his career and published in the *Examiner* on June 5, is a failure. The basic device used, a favorite of his, is the contrasting of sacred diction and syntactic orderings and rhythms with the profane. This slang/scriptural formula, used so successfully and appositely in the last passage but one, is not enough to raise this one above the mediocre.

His literal point, here, is that the theological disputation, sufficiently absurd on the face of it, became rowdy and vulgar and therefore farcical. But this literal point is dull. Bierce had not lost the ability "to make trifles interesting"; he had, however, lost much of his desire to do so--or so it would seem from much of his writing for the *Examiner*. His alternative is to coast, to let his pen be urged on by the momentum of twenty years' writing. From 1887 onward, much of his journalism resembles that of his first years in this: although technically polished, it manages to convey the impression of being written to fill space. It is most often either lethargic or sulfurous and seldom gives the sense of much enjoyment in the writing of it. The same formulas recur more frequently, less care is taken in extracting each situation's maximum effect, and the satire diverges more often into the merely acidulous, the polemical, or, as in the passage just quoted, the foolish.

In short, Bierce seems by this time to have become bored with journalism. Ernest Jerome Hopkins furnishes evidence of this boredom: of the 296 quotations in his Bierce compendium, only 3 are dated after

1887.[15] There are a number of probable reasons for Bierce's later lack of enthusiasm: his reputation and finances were secure, his major books were beginning to appear, and so forth; but I think boredom is probably the main one. Satire seems to be a young man's form--or at least the form of writers with a youthful outlook. Since it implies always a possible better order of things, it requires, then, a degree of optimism, of anger, of purpose. Near-total pessimism can produce only a facsimile--one bearing the same relation to true satire that a paint-by-numbers daub bears to an original oil, or verse to poetry. Bierce did not become a curmudgeon overnight, and there are, of course, numerous admirable passages dated after 1887 but this representative piece can, I think, be read as a symptom of the life draining from his journalism.

The characteristic elements of style are still at their posts. The sentences, by virtue of their structuring, form distinctive patterns which help convey the point--that is, he is still consciously using syntax to control semantics. Also, the biblical inversions are right, the cadences are felt to be right, and so is the diction. It is a passable scriptural burlesque.

The rest of Bierce's rhetorical apparatus is also functioning smoothly. The major technique is dictional incongruity, and the major device is the trope *prosopopoeia*, to which the other devices are subordinated. *Prosopopoeia*, the representation of the speech and actions of an absent or (as here) imaginary person, is not always easy to isolate. Where, for example, does hyperbole leave off and this more extreme trope begin? In this passage, however, there is no such problem: the speech and actions are too preposterous to have occurred in such a setting, and Satan, as it turns out, is an important member of this fantasy cast. Our signal that Bierce is about to desert reality is the phrase "as it were" in the first part of sentence six. The first five sentences may well be a legitimate if exaggerated recounting of a real event; from sentence six onward the narrative moves into the realm of fancy wherein the archetypal Hick Parson can disport himself in all his pristine ignorance and repulsiveness, unfettered by the details and circumstances occasioning this flight of the imagination.

The remaining devices contribute, many of them, to the fantasy and its attendant dictional incongruity. *Hyperbaton*, the departure for effect from normal word order (here, biblical inversions: "at the use whereof," "straightway ensued," etc.), contrasts with the later low "is pizen" and "squawk it." These latter two phrases are vulgar and vulgarly awkward, and as such constitute a combination of the trope *barbaralexis*, unnatural word-coinage or mispronunciation, and the figure *poiciologia*, awkward, ungrammatical speech. Bierce adds two examples of his own characteristic *barbaralexis* (in the sense of unnatural word-coinage) here: "head-wise" and "ramly." We have seen such neologisms before. Their inclusion here seems to be stylistically pointless, as does that of the "kick"/"calcitrant" pun in sentences two and three.

More pertinent is the instance of *acyrologia*, use of an inexact or illogical word, in the front of sentence five: only abstract and inanimate concrete nouns "ensue." The implication is that McHenry either is or is comparable to a natural force, an inevitable and distasteful consequence, rather than a human being. The following *tapinosis* ("mounted the feet of him"), and the preceding *meiosis* ("sky-pilots"), further diminish him and his colleagues. These two tropes, the former consisting in degrading language generally and the latter in degrading epithets, are components of the overall *prosopopoeia*, as is the hyperbole: McHenry is seen to rampage about like a cyclone--flashing, pulling, hurling, dancing--behaving more like an act of than a man of God.

Figures such as the alliteration ("flashed . . . fists," etc.), and the climactically ordered paratactic *anaphora* (He . . . he . . . He") contribute to the sense of frenzied activity and confusion. Other devices might be listed but they, like those briefly considered, are as sounding brass--what is the point to all this slapstick?

A clue to the semantic weakness of the piece can be found in the nature of the devices employed: fully half of these fall readily into the figure category, since the emphasis of their function is on patterning rather than on sense, but their use here is very little to the purpose because there is no purpose. That is, since Bierce has not bothered to build and state a case against Rev. McHenry and the Presbyterians, his word and sentence configurations cannot complement a nonexistent argument, nor can they constitute that argument. These figures are mere ornament.

Of those devices which might be classed as tropes, most are either gratuitous (like the kick/calcitrant pun) or unimportant (like the *acyrologia* "ensued"). The tropes themselves carry little real meaning, and there is very little meaning in the passage for them to affect. This preponderance of form over content has a name, one noted earlier: *asiatismus*, a highly ornamented style lacking matter which was popular in Greece around 100 B.C. and which differed in this respect from the earlier and later simple directness of the Attic style. This suggests a decline on Bierce's part that is, I think, real. He had long prized clarity and forthrightness, but this passage and many others like it exhibit very little of either.

Here, a year earlier, Bierce is again surrendering to sound:

> The bladder-headed sky-pilot calling himself Munhall, and apparently not ashamed of the name, is a daisy with the dew on. If the wretch is correctly reported, in the daily newspapers he utters more lies in an hour than he can expiate in a month of eternities. He is none of your light-draught, flat-bottomed liars for inland navigation; he is a clipper-built, square-rigged, deep-water liar. He never enters the bights and roadsteds [sic] of prevarication, with their contiguous coastage of truth, but holds his course straight away from continental fact, with a free-running and joyant farewellity beautiful to behold. In the time required by a coastwise liar to ship his anchor this sovereign of the sea of mendacity is hull-down on the horizon. In addition to his accomplishments as an assassin of the truth, he appears to cherish a knack at scurrile speech which would precipitate an O'Donnell into serpentile contortions of cataleptic envy: he is a blackguard of genuine inspiration, gifted with the congenital garrulity and vocabular volubility of a Brazilian ape. Now, therefore, may Satan seize upon the soul of him, split it like a fish and keep it to grease the grills of all the victims of revivals, world without end, amen.[16]

This seems on the face of it to be a fair satiric attack. The marine conceit, for example, seems particularly suited to the hyperbole. But this conceit should have been dry-docked years earlier; it appears on page 116 of his first book, *Fiend's Delight* (1873), most recently in the 5 August 1881 issue of the *Wasp*, and several times in between. Also, the typical closing curse (an ersatz *epiphonema*) does little besides offer a belated hint at the nature of Rev. Munhall's alleged lying. And Bierce's alliteration has gotten out of hand (a reliable measure of Biercean dereliction), teasing him into a contradiction: no one ever had "cataleptic contortions." Finally, the Biercean neologisms ("joyant," "farewellity") are gratuitous, and the *tapinosis* ("bladder-headed sky-pilot") is by this time shopworn. In short, this is another instance of Bierce's own rhetorical craft drifting rudderless: after the second sentence the reader waits in vain for an answer to the question, *What*,"lies"?

In "Politics and the English Language" Orwell maintains that jargon supplants thought unless vigilantly excluded. The professional avoids irksome brainwork and precludes refutation or even criticism by more or less consciously obscuring his meaning in a haze of technical diction. Bierce had by this time made too much fun of specialized vocabularies to succumb to similar blandishments in any obvious way, but, as in this passage, the result is much the same. It is to his credit that the fog he raises is distinctively Biercean--clever rhetoric, neologisms, idiosyncractic puns and turns of phrase; it is not to his credit that he raises the fog at all.

Bad prose is the effect, and laziness and boredom seem to be the material causes; but there are two factors standing between these--formal and efficient causes, one might call them.

The first intervening factor in this decline is the absence of a logical framework. Other, less rational writers might not miss such a framework, might feel its lack (if noticed) as an advantage; but for Bierce such an exclusion is unfortunate. As I have several times tried to show, a Bierce passage depends heavily for its success upon the strength and smooth articulation of its logical skeleton. The germ of most good Bierce passages is logical, and accretes about it the other elements of prose, naturally, as it evolves. And it is the logic that moves the passage through the beginning and middle, to a fitting--I have used the term "organic"--end.

The second intervening aspect, a function of the first, is formlessness. If Bierce's prose has one distinguishing trait, it is concision; yet here is a passage which rolls on, amoeba-like, taking more space than two or three of his fine earlier cameos.[17] The reason for this is fairly obvious: a piece of writing either ends where it logically and artistically should end (one thinks of his many apt *epiphonemae*), with its power intact, or it continues until it runs out of steam, expiring in a weak or factitious ending, or none at all (one thinks of the volcanic J. B. Roberts passage, quoted in the previous section, and of its ludicrous ending, "I hope . . . the wretch feels better than he looks": here the mountain labors to bring forth a stillborn mouse--an ending so feeble that it might be thought of as an anti-*epiphonema*).

Without torturing such a general observation into a Law of Conservation of Syntactic Energy, I think it is safe to assume that, generally speaking, the shorter the better. Certainly Bierce believed this. And just as certainly his writing reflects this belief: the best of it is impelled inward, spare, and dense. But one can only be terse when one has matter, structured matter, to concentrate; without this, the opposite technique, attenuation, is in order.

There are other objections, besides stylistic ones, to this casual, centrifugal way of writing. One might say that, for a man of Bierce's skill, such offhand composition is evidence of cheating. The satire is too easy. It is easy in the sense that such imaginative flights are not as imaginative as they might at first seem--are, instead, flights into formula. The formula called for some factual background material to begin with, then a sudden veering into the absurd, then, as likely as not, the revelation that the devil had been a principal in the farce. Thus the clergy in question become a type, indistinguishable from their fellows.

In satire, the unpleasant reality is held up to the pleasing illusion in a way calculated to emphasize the disparity. Often, a second illusion is employed, the opposite of the first, to paint the subject blacker than he is. (The King of Brobdingnag's tirade against the "little odious vermin" is a good example of this counter-illusion.) Rightly handled, such exaggeration draws a thick black line between the real and the ideal. But it is the real that prompts the artist to write, and it is the real in which satire is grounded. When the satire proceeds immediately from the positive to the negative illusion, skimping the reality, then it becomes solipsistic, and satire is not a form that finds its justification in art for art's sake. The effect of such short-circuiting is irrelevance--in Bierce's case a clerical straw man is evoked for pummeling qua clergyman. The individual foibles which occasioned the piece are lost sight of, the criticism becomes general and diffuse; it becomes perfunctory, and since its point is uncertain or banal the wit and humor incorporated in it cannot themselves have much point.

I suggested earlier that Bierce's epigrams may have evolved in three more or less distinct phases. Using his succeeding replies to the anti-Darwinians as a paradigm for this hypothetical process, I pointed out that his original jibe contained the germ of an idea, and that the elaboration of this notion in the second passage yielded a clue to the final epigram. This process, by which form and content pressure each other to yield wit, is in these three quotes admittedly schematized: the original notion, the elaboration on it, and the compression of it nearly always appear (if they do appear) together, in the same passage. There are usually no intervening months or years, and thus it is probably a mistake to put too much emphasis on discrete phases if the entire compositional process is likely a matter of minutes. But the sequence is still perceptible in all good Bierce pieces: statement of theme, comment, abbreviated comment on the comment. This last is the *epiphonema* (the sign that a Bierce passage has reached fruition), dangling at the end, perhaps to be plucked and polished as an epigram. My point here is that in his unsuccessful passages Bierce seems to have quit at the second phase, the figural elaboration, having allowed the means to become the end. And because he quit, his pen kept on.

This is the reason for the Biercean rhetorical fog noted earlier, which is simply a corollary of this reduction of composition to formula. Bierce said that satire is punishment. But, when he did not trouble to construct a case against his victim, then he was left without a focal point and forced to deal in increasingly standardized generalities. Bierce was aware of the problem. In a letter to a man who wished to compile some of the newspaper work, he wrote: "I daresay there are many articles that are duplicated, and I blush to think how many times you'll come upon the same ideas and expressions . . ." (McWilliams, p. 289).

The result is, as we have seen, congealed originality: a sort of Oldspeak, a prolix and structureless piece of prose caparisoned with worn Bierceanisms, that bores to the extent that it was written in boredom. In such pieces Bierce begs the question in much the same way that he did eighteen years earlier, the way more pedestrian writers do so, by assuming that certain objects and situations are humorous or telling, rather than making them so. The humorist's arsenal (fat men, mothers-in-law, etc.) never appealed to him, but he had in twenty years assembled his own stock of props and patterns which in careless moments he manipulated for the automatic laugh, as he had manipulated easy tropes in his apprentice pieces. At such times his writing was a mere languid gesture or self-plagiarism and for this reason not much better than the rough-hewn glee of his first years as a journalist. At a time when he had achieved a commanding place among North American newspapermen, he seems to have tired of the trade. His own definition of achievement (in *The Devil's Dictionary*) comes to mind: "The death of endeavor and the birth of disgust."

# NOTES

[1] "Tangential Views," *Works*, IX, 243.

[2] "Tariff, *n*. A scale of taxes on imports, designed to protect the domestic producer against the greed of his consumer" (*The Devil's Dictionary*, *Works*, VII).

[3] "Epigrams," *Works*, VIII, 352.

[4] Ibid., 373-74.

[5] *The Devil's Dictionary*, *Works*, VII.

[6] "Epigrams," *Works*, VIII, 369.

[7] *Wasp*, 27 January 1882.

[8] Follett has noticed Bierce's skill with whimsical Latin, and cites a few examples: "the American woman is *Felis pugnans*, the house fly *Musca maledicta*, the camel *Splaypes humpidorsus*, the tadpole *Thaddeus Polandensis*, the human hog (whose grunt is slang) *Pignoramus intolerabilis*, and the American novelist *Mendax interminabilis*" (p. 287).

[9] Eric Partridge, *A Dictionary of the Underworld* (1949; rpt. New York: Crown, 1961).

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

[12] J. S. Farmer and W. E. Henley, *Slang and Its Analogues* (1890-1904; rpt. New York: Arno Press, 1970).

[13] Ibid.

[14] So many things struck Bierce as being bosh that he began to discriminate: there was "pure" bosh, the least virulent, then "blue," "blu-," "pristine," "congealed," and, the most insupportable, "spun."

[15] *The Ambrose Bierce Satanic Reader* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1968).

[16] *Wasp*, 27 March 1886.

[17] The passage is, to be exact, 412 words long; this is the rest of it:

> When he had exhausted his demi-johns of wrath a mild-mannered little blonde gentleman, apparently near-sighted, rose to reply. "The Rev. Mr.---," said the Moderator, hesitating as he nodded assent. "The brother from---." With an engaging bow and a smile that lighted up the hall like a sunbeam reflected from a pan of

milk, the brother began: "Mr. Moderator and brethren, I have listened with profit to the brother from San Francisco--I live there myself sometimes"--Brother McHenry fixed him with a searching eye--"and I cordially approve all that he has said. In my own congregation the music is all vocal: it is damned vocal!" The brethren leapt to their feet; a great silence fell upon the general assembly. Down sank the gas-jets till each was but a tiny point of blue flame, and in the ghastly light men looked as corpses all. Suddenly the clock began hammering out upon its ailing gong an incalculable multitude of hours and the Unknown Brother was seen to consult his watch. Then he withdrew by way of an opening which had thoughtfully presented itself in the floor. "The Devil!" ejaculated Brother McHenry, with unguarded tongue. "Indubitably," said the Moderator and adjourned the session.

> The mind is its own place, and in itself
> Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.
> --Satan

# CONCLUSION

## 1. The Traits

Bierce's style, his mature style, is a strange and complex thing. It was, by the mid-1880's, too sophisticated to be very much at home in the newspapers, too complicated for a medium that measured the result in column inches. My reason for emphasizing the inadequacy of the last piece quoted was not to delimit the time span within which his style may be profitably studied, but to suggest that post-1890's newspaper columns are no longer the best places to look.

My concern has been with the development of his style, and the columns have been handy guideposts to help mark the way between his Civil War journal and, for example, *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians*. The way needs marking because it is not straight. One might say that, very generally, there is a movement in Bierce's style, from an early use of easy tropes to a late use of easy figures, and that between these--say, 1874-1884--lay a fruitful decade or so when he often struck a good balance between reason, figure, and trope in his columns. This is, I think, broadly true but also probably misleading, since particulars and countermovements are scanted: traits and tendencies, good and bad, evolve and atrophy and change and reassert themselves throughout his career, especially in the first twenty years. Each of the twelve chief passages was included to illustrate particular varying and various facets, the more important ones, of his style.

In Bierce's earliest work we noticed a facile, sarcastic, pun-ridden, stichomythic tendency to verbal horseplay. The second 1868 passage, the non-book-review, shows a clear gain in choice and ordering of words, and in restraint. Here the figures *anaphora* and *isocolon* provide a framework for, and render more effective, the dominant trope *paralepsis*. That is, the repetition and the balanced syntax provide a deliberate tone, which suggests that in the description nothing important will be missed. The third passage, the burlesque prayer, is an instance of Bierce's growing mimetic skill (skill in exploiting dictional incongruities), and it prefigures the typical Biercean reversal, a seeming switch in direction bearing implications for what has gone before. This piece also indicates that Bierce understood the value to his style of *ellipsis, auxesis,* and the repetition and alternation of long and short sentences. Finally, in his combination of *mimesis* with *anacephalaeosis* (the antagonistic jargons in the closing sentence, which imply Bierce's objections) we may catch a glimmer of an emergent *epiphonema*, the witty closing which bears implications for what has gone before and encourages a rereading in the light of this altered context. Bierce's ironic defense of the Faith through faith, passage four, contains one of his first successful uses of the persona, is an early instance of his increasing reliance on logic and on the figures *isocolon, anaphora,* and *conduplicatio*. The unsuccessful attack on

Macpherson, passage five, shows Bierce abandoning logic for the figures *bomphiologia, parenthesis* (the mid-branch), *anaphora,* and *diazeugma.* These figures, valuable in themselves and increasingly important components of his style, were overused in this piece, rendering it less an attack than an evasion.

Passage six, the one dealing with Rev. Heath, contrasts with the one on Macpherson in its restraint, and its incorporation of logic and understatement. It also relies for its effect upon *hyrmos*, the long, balanced sentence which suspends until the end its sense, and upon *adianoeta*, the calculated ambiguity. The seventh passage, Rev. Hemphill's Eastertime rebuke, is one of the better exercises Bierce had so far written in complex and elaborate syntax: the complementary figures *hyrmos* and *brevitas*, and *hyperbaton* (inverse word order), *anaphora, auxesis,* and *alliteration* accommodate and complement such tropes as *exergasia* (the same thought in many forms), *ploce, mimesis, litotes,* and *paronomasia.* This piece, like the preceding and succeeding ones, has the wittily telling close, the *epiphonema.* Besides illustrating his (by this time) mastery of such a closing, the eighth passage can be taken as an indication of how deeply Bierce's thought and style had come to be imbued with logic, and how deftly he was able to flesh out a logical blunder and turn it into a short, pointed essay or vignette. This is his reply to Bishop Simpson; in it, figures such as *megaloprepeia* (lofty utterance), *brevitas, chiasmus,* and *diazeugma* help realize the *reductio* and carry the tropes *adianoeta,* bathos, *anacephalaeosis,* and *catachresis,* the wrenched metaphor.

The ninth passage, the covert fable, is a good illustration of how vivid and concrete Bierce's style could be, and of how these qualities result from, among other things, his peculiar use of *hypotyposis* (the mimicry of acts) and of *synecdoche*. Passage ten, the ironic denunciation of the clergy for ignoring Rev. Morrison's predicament, was included to show Bierce's mastery of the persona, of word-coining (*cacozelia*), of *paronomasia* (punning, in this case elaborately, with his key term), and of *adianoeta* (an illustration of what may be accomplished by the omission of a comma). But, mainly, the piece was intended to show Bierce's facility in using unorthodox diction (*barbaralexis*), and to imply how unjournalistic his style had become. His reply to the armed parson, passage eleven, indicates once again his commitment to logic, and his fondness for the figures *isocolon, alliteration*, and *conduplicatio*. This piece shows, also, the potential effectiveness of a haphazardly maintained *litotes*, of a restrained *meiosis* (degrading epithets), of *catachresis, paronomasia, adianoeta*, and *ploce*. The final passage shows what always happened when he set his stylistic engine running and neglected to let out the clutch.

To summarize: we are likely to find in Bierce's best stylistic efforts some sort of logical frame; and within this, such extensive figures as *anaphora, isocolon, auxesis, parenthesis, hyrmos*, and *brevitas;* and within these, such tropes as *mimesis, anacephalaeosis, epiphonema, adianoeta, ploce, paronomasia, litotes, hypotyposis*, and *synecdoche;* and within these, such relatively minute figures as *ellipsis, conduplicatio*, and alliteration. Also, we are likely to find reversals and significant juxtapositions, and we may find a persona interposed beteeen Bierce and ourselves. These are the traits we find in his best writing because these are the traits which make such pieces his best, which constitute the springs and gears and bearings of a very powerful style. And, as I have suggested, the columns are useful in marking the emergence of this style, in charting its erratic development.

Progress, however, or development, presupposes a destination or worthwhile end product. Intriguing as the columns are, I admit that if they were their own culmination they would be unlikely to interest us now. They would have all the interest for us that, say, the work of an excellent Victorian painter would have if that artist had chosen to render mostly trivia in miniatures, and then to bury them.

Newspaper work is seldom unearthed for its own sake--merely to mark a bold bright phrase or two in a century's rubbish heap--but to serve some larger purpose. So, in a way, Bierce helped ensure a small but continuing interest in his earlier journalism by often neglecting it later on, in favor of full-scale fictions. There was no decline in Bierce's ability but rather a shift in emphasis: he gradually became less a journalist whose clippings were often good enough to put between covers, than an author whose fiction often first appeared in the newspapers, with his bread and butter columns.

I noted the stylistic traits we are likely to find in his best paragraphs; we will not, however, find all or even most of these in a single paragraph. The trouble, then, with even his best weekly paragraphs is that they are too short and too slight to give his mature style full scope.

In this, the best later paragraphs are like the worst earlier squibs: they lack room. His style, growing in these passages, frequently marred them, either by crowding a slight subject to death (as, for example, with Hemphill) or by bursting the paragraphs' bounds (as with Munhall, Roberts, and McHenry). In either case the style suffers too because the balance of semantics and syntactics is upset.

## 2. Control

I turn, then, to the Biercean short story, because it is the culmination of twenty years of writing paragraphs, because as such it is a good justification for studying those paragraphs, and because it provides the chance to see Bierce's style whole and therefore to the best advantage.

Of his stories I choose "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" because it is the one piece of his writing that most people can connect with the name Bierce, and because this story not only displays his style at its fullest development, but is a type or exemplar of it. Mark Schorer is no doubt right in finding those literary works great "whose forms are . . . exactly equivalent with their subjects, and [whose] evaluation of their subjects exists in their styles" (O'Connor, p. 29). The story exhibits what Virginia Tufte calls "syntactic symbolism" or "grammar as analogue" (these terms are the title and subtitle, respectively, of her sixteenth chapter). That is, the style is so closely matched to the story line that it not only conveys and reflects the action but simulates it. This will become clearer shortly.

Henry James's "The Turn of the Screw" was for many years read as a particularly deft and chilling ghost story. Only recently has it been given the attention it deserves, attention that has revealed it for what it essentially is: a masterful exploration of abnormal psychology--repression, groundless terror, and madness. "Owl Creek Bridge" has a similar history of inattention. It has languished in anthologies, chiefly those used in secondary schools, and has been read as an action tale of extreme power written by an otherwise unfamiliar Civil War writer.

It is fitting that, if Bierce's slender popular reputation must rest on any one story, it should rest on this one since it is his best work. But it is unfortunate that the story should be generally valued for its accidents and not its essence--that the fine Biercean imagination, grisly wit, and poignant ironies should be slighted or overlooked entirely--and that it should be read, as Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren read it, as a compelling war yarn with a gimmick, a reverse O. Henry twist.[1] Because "Owl Creek Bridge" is still generally misunderstood, a rereading of it is in order. In the next pages I will be attempting to get it in sharper focus, for its own sake, and for that of the stylistic details which thereby become perceptible and comprehensible as part of a larger whole.

As evidence that the story is still beset by general misunderstanding I cite a recent and puzzling article by Fred H. Marcus, titled "Film and Fiction: 'An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge'" (*California English Journal*, 7 [Feb. 1971], 14-23). He sees the story as a "narrowly homogenized Gothic tale of horror," "spiced by authorial intrusions of sardonic observation" (pp. 15, 14, resp.). Professor Marcus has noticed two of Bierce's more important sentences ("What he heard was the ticking of his watch." "He was a Federal scout."), and contends that here "the horror reaches its apogee in the terse closing phrase which flares like luminous evil over the preceding lines" (p. 15); and that "the eerie light illuminates section I and maintains the chill mood of Bierce's horror tale" (p. 16). The persona's observation that Farquhar was evidently "no vulgar assassin" reflects Bierce's "social consciousness of caste" (p. 16), according to Marcus (this is one of the story's three themes, as Marcus reads it); and Farquar's post-imaginary-plunge hypersensitivity reveals "man's usual insensitivity to the vibrant, throbbing life pulsating about him" (p. 17). A review of a cinematic adaptation of the story follows this observation, and Marcus closes his article with the reflection that, since the film-maker used a number of details which "trivialize death," and since this "trivializing of death suggests contemporary events only too clearly," therefore, "the late nineteenth-century story becomes highly relevant to our time and place" (p. 23).

I differ somewhat with nearly all the "Owl Creek" commentators, but with Professor Marcus I disagree completely. In those places where his meaning is accessible he seems to be arguing that "Owl Creek Bridge" is a sensational thriller à la Poe (probably the most widely held interpretation of the story). I will show that it is anything but.

The story is, incidentally, an action tale. Essentially, its concern is with what may be loosely called philosophy: it is a speculation on the nature of time and, closely related, on the nature of abnormal psychology--perception and cognition. Closely related, in turn, is the story's concern with epistemology and with the logic upon which this epistemology rests. The story is also (and this shouldn't surprise us) satire: it is a burlesque of the orthodox war yarn in which the hero's death or survival is noble and significant. It is also in effect a lampoon-in-progress against those who, expecting the usual war yarn, mistake "Owl Creek Bridge" for their standard fare and overlook its central concerns; and its ending is thus a sharp rap across the sensibilities for "that cave-bat, 'the general reader,'" dealt in punishment for woolgathering.[2]

Like Henry James, Bierce expected a great deal from his readers. The main lesson we learn from "Prattle" is that reading Bierce is not a spectator sport; he demands participation, and for those who do participate the recompense is fine and subtle Biercean wit. But Bierce had only scorn for "bad readers--readers who, lacking the habit of analysis, lack also the faculty of discrimination, and take whatever is put before them, with the broad, blind catholicity of a slop-fed conscience or a parlor pig" (*Argonaut*, 22 June 1878). Bierce, as we have seen, did not write ordinary newspaper columns; there is no reason to assume that his fiction will be ordinary fiction. If, therefore, we approach the fiction with open eyes, as the columns have taught us to do, then we may expect the rewards Bierce gives to those who extend him this courtesy. Only a modicum of alertness should be enough to convince us that "Owl Creek Bridge," far from being some sort of hysterical Gothic horripilator, is about as tightly controlled and meticulously organized as any story is likely to be.

Stuart Cowan Woodruff, toward the close of an interesting discussion of the story, writes that, "somehow the reader is made to participate in the split between imagination and reason, to *feel* the escape is real while he *knows* it is not."[3] Woodruff is right, but his "somehow" could be improved upon, and in the following pages I try to do so. As a start, it is worth pointing out that the reader feels this split because the protagonist hears and sees things he could not hear and see; yet the reader's sympathy may be so engaged that this knowledge is kept in abeyance. The reader identifies with Farquhar, and because he does and to the extent he does, is also prone to aberration. Having allowed his heart to enter his head, the reader is likely to feel shock, then resentment, at the story's end. This resentment stems partly, I think, from a feeling of having been hoodwinked by a clever trick. This is understandable but unreasonable, since the story is not (and there are abundant clues to this) an escape sequence.

The story is, instead, a fascinating speculation, cast in a fictional mold, of the almost limitless powers of the human mind under stress. The mind is certainly central to the story--the mind, and its capacity for interpreting experience, for imposing order on that experience, and, if necessary, for evolving an alternate experience, one that is bearable. It is the last flicker of the mind that claims our attention--how it responds in its final split second. David R. Weimer puts it very well:

> What the characters undergo--and what matters to Bierce--is an instant, always brightly attractive in its brief duration, of intensely felt or intensely perceived experience. . . . . . . . . .
> The horse and rider will fall, the groans of the dying soldiers resound, the courage go for naught. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
> The grotesquely unstable, fragile, precarious nature of the individual's rare and therefore valuable experience is precisely Bierce's theme.[4]

As in James's story, everything in this one depends upon point of view: in both stories there are shifts, the effect of which is two-fold, to engage the reader in the immediacy of the action, and to pose, subtly, the epistemological question, How do you know what this action is?--or, more pointedly, Whose testimony can you trust? James, as his story unfolds, subtly and persistently undermines the credibility of the governess. Bierce does the same with Farquhar.

He sets the stage for this erosion of Farquhar's credibility in the first sentence: "A man stood upon a railroad bridge in northern Alabama, looking down into the swift water twenty feet below" (*Works*, II, 27).

The water is swift; what thoughts this current calls up for the doomed man are at this point open to conjecture, since we are still observing Farquhar and his surroundings, not observing through him. The point of view is limited, the narrator acutely perceptive but profoundly disinterested--this is, after all, only an "occurrence," and a very common one at that. We are met with a series of uncertainties which communicate the narrator's limitations. Things beyond the moment and the field of vision are not definitely known, and the narrator is careful to separate, precisely, fact from conjecture: the captain is definitely a captain because he is in the uniform "of his rank," but the sergeant *may* in civil life have been a deputy sheriff--perhaps he looks like one, but there is no way to be sure. Also, because the railroad was "lost to view" in the forest after a hundred yards, the narrator can only infer from military usage that "doubtless there was an outpost farther along." Similarly, Farquhar was "apparently" thirty-five years old, "evidently" no vulgar assassin, and a civilian and planter "if one might judge from his habit."

Bierce's handling of this persona (for that is the speaker at the story's beginning) is as deft as it is unobtrusive. His language tells us a number of things about him. The columns have made us aware that Bierce could and did use his personae to characterize (and often damn) themselves through their own speech. That is what he does here. Despite the persona's objectivity, he is, the irony indicates, slightly amused: "The liberal military code makes provision for hanging many kinds of persons, and gentlemen are not excluded." This raises another point: the persona seems to know a great deal about the military. In the first part of section one we are treated to explanations of martial code, etiquette, usage, terms, and postures. In brief, the story's title and its first section smack of the general officer's memoirs--perhaps the memoirs of an old soldier who is at heart a *littérateur*. This persona stands outside Farquhar, and is thus objective, but he also stands inside the game of war, by which his perceptions are colored, and is thus somewhat subjective: death is war's stock-in-trade, and its infliction simply business as usual.

But Farquhar's perceptions, when we begin to share them, are different. We see him appraising the apparatus that is to kill him: it "commended itself to his judgment as simple and effective." This first look inside Farquhar's head is also the first and last instance of his displaying anything like judgment. Immediately afterward we are put on our guard that, sad as his situation is--this is not an occurrence for him but the occurrence--he is not to be trusted as an interpreter of reality; that his perceptions are now colored by, and soon to be supplanted by, imagination: he is again gazing at the water which we already know is "swift" and he watches it "swirling" and "racing madly" below. Then: "A piece of dancing driftwood caught his attention and his eyes followed it down the current. How slowly it appeared to move! What a sluggish stream!"

Each of these three sentences reflects a different point of view. The limited observer, the military persona, notices an object catching Farquhar's attention and Farquhar's eyes following that object; the limited observer becomes an omniscient one in the next sentence, and is thus able to relate how this object appears to Farquhar; in the third sentence the observer again becomes limited, but it is a different observer, Farquhar himself. The three sentences effect a brief but complete reversal, from objectivity to subjectivity, and represent the story's three major points of view: the bulk of section one proceeds from a limited narrator speaking in the third person, a narrator whose limitation stems from his perspicacity; section two is told by an omiscient narrator who quickly begins to sound like Farquhar; and most of section three is told through Farquhar, a limited narrator speaking in the third person, whose limitation stems from his incapacity. Also, and more importantly, the three sentences alert us to the possibility that such changes are in the offing. That is, this momentary but significant glance through Farquhar's eyes sets a precedent. The character has become, briefly, a second persona.

This maneuver is closely analogous to the characteristic Biercean zig-zag, noticed several times earlier. Our knowledge of the technique should alert us to this subtle but masterly instance of it. What may have seemed a negligible inadvertence, is seen to be stylistically important and intentional. Moreover, there is a pattern of such reversals grading from minute (the three sentence about-face), to extensive (the intrusion of the omniscient narrator--and reality--into fancy, at the close of each section), to all-inclusive (the last such intrusion, the whiplash ending).

These three sentences merit a bit more attention. Bierce signals this reversal, accompanies and helps accomplish it, by supplanting prose with near-verse for as long as the reversal takes. Sentence one begins with four iambs ("A piece of dancing driftwood caught"); sentence two consists of the same ("How slowly it appeared to move!"); and sentence three is the opposite of the iamb, is two and a half trochees (What a sluggish stream!"). That is the meter. Bierce accelerates the first sentence's iambics with the d-alliteration, and slows the third sentence's trochaics with the *s*-alliteration, begun in sentence two. The final words vary this alliteration by juxtaposing *s*- and *sh*-sibilants, thus joining sound to sense: it is impossible to articulate, quickly, "sluggish stream."

These are my reasons for calling this reversal masterly. Was Bierce capable of such niceties? The columns prove that he was indeed. And the three sentences, additional evidence of his skill, together constitute an example of Professor Tufte's "syntactic symbolism": letter, syllable, and word configurations mark the break in the old point of view and help convey the new one.

Farquhar's mental hyperactivity is emphasized in the next paragraph. The ticking of his watch becomes to his ears thunderous, and more and more infrequent. ("No reader," Professor Marcus assures us, "could possibly fail to be reminded of Poe's story of "The Tell-Tale Heart'" [p. 15].) Again we are perceiving through him. The sound "seemed" both distant and close, but then the interposed consciousness of the omniscient narrator again disappears: the intervals of silence did not "seem to grow," they "grew"; and the sounds "increased." It is, must be, his own brain, with thoughts being "flashed" upon it, that misinterprets this subdued and regular sound. As Farquhar's mind works at ever higher speed everything else correspondingly slows, and we are prepared, it seems to me, for an hallucinated escape rather than a real one.

This is what intrigued Bierce: the possibility that there is no death which is mercifully instantaneous since ordinary time may not apply. I found this intriguing and revealing passage in a Bierce essay on the then new electric chair:

> The physicians know nothing about it; for anything they know to the contrary, death by electricity may be the most frightful torment that it is possible for any of nature's forces or processes to produce. The agony may be not only inconceivably great, but to the sufferer it may seem to endure for a period inconceivably long. That many of the familiar physical indications of suffering are absent (though "long, shuddering sighs" and "straining at the straps" are not certainly symptoms of joy) is very little to the purpose when we know that electricity paralyzes the muscles by whose action pain is familiarly manifested. We know that it paralyzes all the seats of sensation, for that matter, and puts an end to possibilities of pain. That is only to say that it kills. But by what secret and infernal pang may not all this be accompanied or accomplished? Through what unnatural exaltation of the senses may not the moment of its accomplishing be commuted into unthinkable cycles of time? ("The Chair of Little Ease," *Works*, XI, 365-66)

--Hence Farquhar, his senses "exalted and refined," in his "unthinkable arcs of oscillation."

Farquhar's "face had not been covered nor his eyes bandaged"; he is free to perceive and we are free to share these perceptions, reservedly or otherwise.

Earlier, in the Morrison, Horton, and Simonds passages, we saw how Bierce manipulated his key terms, and, in the Morrison passage, noted the effect of this technique. He does the same thing here: forms of, and synonyms and cognates for "see," "know," "seem," and "is" abound. Farquhar's large, kindly, dark gray eyes perceive things, or seem to, but between perception, cognition, and reality lurk the disconcerting "seems." The function of this epistemological pattern is treated more specifically further on; generally, the series of words serves as a continuing but subtle hint to the reader that Farquhar's gray eyes, like the gray ones of the marksman, may be imperfect: "Nevertheless, this one had missed."

For example, at the beginning of section two, the second, third, fourth, and fifth sentences have as their verbs "seemed," "seemed," "appeared," "seemed." These initial statements are followed by more definite ones until "the power of thought *was* restored; he *knew* that the rope had broken . . ." (my emphases). But this latter certainty rests on, since it is preceded by, the earlier "seeming." Farquhar's last sight before he drops is the water below; his last thoughts are of his wife and children, and of escape. And his judgment, never (as we shall see) particularly robust, is now dead.

The story breaks here, and in a third person narrative just enough of Farquhar's background is given to explain who he is and what are his motives and how he came to find his neck in a noose. It was Bierce's custom (which was in line with his general policy of literary concision) to telescope expository passages drastically, omitting anything that even remotely resembled "padding." We are not told the circumstances (because they are "unnecessary to relate here") which kept Farquhar out of the confederate army; we are not told what happended after the departure of the Federal scout, because whatever happened is unimportant compared with the result. Farquhar is drawn sparely here in part two, given just enough humanity to appeal to our own. He is given just enough and no more. And we are cautioned to keep our sympathies in check, to avoid seeing the execution in terms of tragic heroes and villains. In fact, all the characters are villains of a sort, and Bierce says so both implicitly, in his use of *mimesis* (to be considered shortly), and here, explicitly: Farquhar was "a civilian who was at heart a soldier, and who in good faith and without too much qualification assented to at least a part of the frankly villainous dictum that all is fair in love and war." That is, he is no better than his captors, and within the code to which they all subscribe his punishment is condign.

This raises a fairly important point. All of the "Owl Creek" critics, except Cathy Davidson, contend that Bierce enlists our sympathy for Farquhar. If they are correct, then Bierce is guilty of a subterfuge, and Brooks and Warren are right to ask, "is the surprise ending justified; is it validated by the body of the story; is it, in other words, a mere trick, or is it expressive and functional?" (p. 52). That is, if Bierce first evokes our sympathy then betrays it, we would have good reason to regard the ending as a gimmick, and the story itself as little more than an elaborate prolegomenon to that gimmick. Farquhar, Stuart Woodruff tells us,"is such an attractive figure: brave, sensitive, highly intelligent . . . It is the tragic waste of such a man which engages our sympathies."[5] Woodruff is mistaken here: Farquhar is not brave, he is foolhardy; he is not sensitive, he is callous (the love and war dictum tells us that); and he is not highly intelligent, he is, as we shall see, rather stupid.

And he gets what is coming to him. This is another instance of concision, since by playing down the hanging's larger implications, Bierce is free to concentrate on its immediate subjective significance. But because there is no suggestion from the author that Farquhar should live--that a higher justice and morality than that of a military tribunal demand that he live--Bierce would seem to be relinquishing a major hold on his audience, since it is only natural for readers to side with what is presented as good. Bierce does not present Farquhar as good (rather, just the reverse), but as merely human, an aristocrat impatient with his edenic life, "a student of hanging," a bold fellow with a touch of bravado.

It is the bravado that kills him--or at least the romantic Southern cant behind it. Thomas L. Erskine, in a perceptive essay, notices that "Farquhar has unrealistic ideas about war."[6] Cathy N. Davidson had observed this earlier; she was also the first to analyse the story's diction systematically.[7] Dr. Davidson points out, rightly, that section two has a great many nearly meaningless words. And I read the beginning of this section as a tiny burlesque of martial rhetoric: words like "gallant," "inglorious," "opportunity," "distinction," and "adventure" begin cropping up almost immediately. They are symptoms of Farquhar's terminal "Walter Scott disease," as Twain called it. Bierce's inclusion in the *mimesis* of alliteration ("longing . . . release . . . larger . . . life") helps make his point by inflating the words and phrases, rendering them emptier than they inherently are. This calls attention to them and thus to the irony lurking within them. Bierce emphasizes the burlesque with *isocolon*, that hoariest of encomia for the stay-at-home ("No service . . . too humble, no adventure too perilous"), and follows this with a sentence that epitomizes chivalric fatuity: the Federal scout, the serpent in their garden, asks for a drink of water, and "Mrs. Farquhar was only to happy to serve him with her own white hands."

Is this a burlesque, or is it a dismal, squashy spot in which Bierce the bungler goes from the tumid to the trite to the inane? We are well over into the delicacy violet range on the spectrum here, and it is possible to miss this subtle burlesque or be mistaken about it. (Granted, anyone aware of Bierce's long training in and mastery of this variant is unlikely to overlook it or mistake it for anything else.) John Kenney Crane has mistaken satire for mawkishness; he assures us that "it is, of course, the blatant sentimentality that mars the story," and it is presumably this passage that lies at the root of his objection.[8] Crane assumes that the vocabulary is Bierce's, but there is no reason why he should; and, as the columns have shown us, there is every reason to believe that what may strike us as Victorian gingerbread, would have struck Bierce as contemporary treacle, and that he would use it to damn Farquhar the persona out of his own mouth.

Let me bear down on this point by taking a hypothetical case which I hope is not frivolous. Suppose that some hapless scholar should write, in a moment of abstraction, an article with some such title as "Dudliners: Instances of Joycean Narrative Crassitude." Suppose that in this article he argued that James Joyce's diction is often very little better than that of his characters, and cited as evidence this sentence: "But wasn't Maria glad when the women had finished their tea and the cook and the dummy had begun to clear away the tea-things!"[9]--and concluded that Joyce is hardly the stylist everyone takes him for, that he is fit for the pulps, and that studying him is a waste of time. We may imagine this critic's probable fate, should his article ever see print.

The point is that one of the things which makes fiction fiction is the author's option of addressing his readers indirectly. To assume that stupid words signify authorial obtuseness is to ask for trouble. Such words may well be a sign of authorial astuteness, as they are in section two of "Owl Creek Bridge." The irony in the passage is subtle but perceptible; a little further evidence that that is what it is cannot, however, do any harm. In "The Captain of 'The Camel,'" for example, starving mariners are reduced to eating volumes of current genteel fiction, with the result that:

> Our diction consisted, in about equal parts, of classical allusion, quotation from the stable, simper from the scullery, cant from the clubs, and the technical slang of heraldry. We boasted much of ancestry, and admired the whiteness of our hands whenever the skin was visible through a fault in the grease and tar. . . .("The Ocean Wave," *Works*, VIII, 234-35)

The tumidity, triteness, and inanity, then, are Farquhar's. The words are his, not Bierce's, and they indicate that, besides being a villain *manqué*, he is a fool. The flaws Crane finds in the story are flaws in Farquhar's character; and Gordon W. Cunliffe, in writing that "the sympathy evoked by the description of the main figure is here [in section two] confirmed," would have been correct if he had written not "confirmed" but "cancelled."[10]

Peyton Farquhar is a faint echo of another and nobler rebel and monomaniac who found himself on the losing side of an even more disastrous civil war, Harry Hotspur: "I will ease my heart/Albeit I make a hazard of my head" could be Farquhar's motto.[11] Here is another Victorian crotchet (or so it would seem to the casual reader), gratuitous allusion: Farquhar "looked a moment at his 'unsteadfast footing.'" This must have seemed gratuitous to everyone for the last eighty years because no one, so far as I know, has bothered to follow up this little tag. It is worth following up. Here is the allusion in its context (Worcester tries to placate Harry):

> Peace cousin, say no more.
> And now I will unclasp a secret book,
> And to your quick-conceiving discontents
> I'll read you matter deep and dangerous,
> As full of peril and adventurous spirit
> As to o'er-walk a current roaring loud
> On the unsteadfast footing of a spear.
> *Hotspur*. If he fall in, good night. Or sink, or swim!
> Send danger from the east unto the west,
> So honor cross it, from the north to south,
> And let them grapple! O the blood more stirs
> To rouse a lion than to start a hare.

*Northumberland*. Imagination of some great exploit
Drives him beyond the bounds of patience.
*Hotspur*: By heaven methinks it were an easy leap
To pluck bright honor from the pale-fac'd moon,
Or dive into the bottom of the deep,
Where fadom-line could never touch the ground,
And pluck up drowned honor by the locks,
So he that doth redeem her thence might wear
Without corrival all her dignities.
But out upon this half-fac'd fellowship!
*Worcester*. He apprehends a world of figures here,
But not the form of what he should attend. (I.iii.187-210)

Farquhar, obsessed with honor, should have attended to the "dusty horseman," asked him about his regiment, and so forth, to see if this man were what he seemed. But "gray-clad" is good enough for Farquhar. And when the horseman tells him that the piled driftwood "is now dry and would burn like tow," Farquhar's reaction (an inference from his predicament in section one) is like Harry's: "Why, it cannot choose but be a noble plot!" (I.iii.277). As an unreflecting and ingenuous glory-hunter, who reveals his tragicomic flaw in his lexicon, who wears his soldierly heart on his sleeve, and who seems never to have heard (though "all is fair") that there exist such things as spies, Farquhar does not need an evil enemy. He does not require an enemy at all, only a catalyst.

Bierce, accordingly, presents the Union company as being neither good nor evil, but slightly less than human. This is how he maintains the necessary semblance of neutrality toward his characters, but also, having discouraged sympathy for Farquhar, retains the reader's interest in him. We know something of the rebel, but of the Union soldiers we know nothing.

Biercean *metonymy* is at work here. It is distinct and distinctive enough in his war writing, that Lars Ahnebrink has called it "a process of animism".[12] Bierce invented this technique (just as he invented the drastic fictional distortion of time). The value of this "process of animism" is that, by confounding the human with the inanimate, Bierce, and later Stephen Crane, were able to convey, in a subtle but telling manner man's insignificance and subhumanity in his own conflicts.

The Union soldiers are presented, in section one, in terms of the arms they carry, as extensions of their weapons. They are so presented intentionally. Just as Farquhar's vice and folly qualify him for satiric treatment, so the soldiers' apparent lack of any feeling or thought qualifies them for the same.

And satiric treatment is what they get. The sentinels at either end of the bridge and facing outward stand in the "support" position with their rifles. They are not spectators but merely blockades; they "might have been statues to adorn the bridge." The main body of the company stands "staring stonily, motionless," with their rifles at "parade rest," lined up like the vertical tree trunks of the stockade. A lieutenant stands with his hands folded over the hilt of this sword. The captain stands silently. This tableau depicts the machine of death in repose. In action it is hardly less regular, is suggestive of the automata that emerge from the works of Swiss town hall clocks to elaborately chime the hours--an apposite suggestion, since Bierce's main theme is the concept of time. A robot-like series of movements transposes the sergeant and the captain, a nod from the captain removes the sergeant from the plank and precipitates Farquhar.[13]

This is *hypotyposis*, which we saw used in the Hen Horton passage of 1883. Here, the robot-like actions are conveyed by and reflected in a pattern of robot-like sentences and phrases ("The preparations . . .

the two . . . The sergeant . . . These movements . . . the end . . . This plank . . . the plank . . . The arrangement"). Such a flatfooted series--article/subject, article/subject--reads like the section in an army training manual on the field-stripping of rifles, and is a further instance of Professor Tufte's "syntactic symbolism."[14]

Here is more jargon. Bierce has allowed his military persona to drift into a burlesque of denatured and clumsy military diction, to discribe the graceless maneuvers and to blur their significance. This is *mimesis*, again, and it functions with the *metonymy* and the *hypotyposis* and makes Bierce's point, unobtrusively but effectively, about the soldiers: if Farquhar is all too human, as the euphemism has it, then the Union company is all too inhuman. These three tropes, working within the figures *isocolon* and *anaphora*, constitute satire of a high order. The language is objective but the message is subjective indeed.

Furthermore, the burlesque complements Farquhar's jingoism, already noted, which comes a page later. The jargons interact, revealing the weaknesses of each--a sophisticated and rarefied version of the technique Bierce used in his burlesque prayer of 1869. These two comprise what Dr. Davidson calls "the rhetoric of death," the substance of which is "I am ready to kill" (the military persona of section one), and "I am ready to die" (the pre-Owl Creek Farquhar of section two).[15]

Between the two, military litotes and military hyperbole, Bierce inserts the brief, lyrical, "dancing driftwood" passage, the beginnings of "the rhetoric of life," which dominates the story's last section.[16] The arrangement contrasts this lyrical passage with the preceding and succeeding jargons, and thus calls attention to the passage and lends it force. Because the arrangement does this, it is a good solid buttress for my central contention that in Bierce's best writing pattern is paramount: not only does *alliteration*, for example, work within individual sentences, and *anaphora* work within individual paragraphs, but paragraphs are so arranged as to extract the maximum meaning from the less extensive orderings. The result is that this very brief introduction to "the rhetoric of life" takes on, in a real sense, a life of its own.

Dr. Davidson's term makes obvious and explicit the sub-verbal irony, latent in the figures, which reinforces the more overt ironies carried by the words' sense: Farquhar begins really to appreciate life in his final seconds, and begins to perceive its value through a hallucination. His position is analogous to--again, Professor Tufte's "grammar as analogue" --that of the little "driftwood" passage: he is caught between the two antagonistic "death rhetorics." These cancel each other and thus complement Bierce's only statement *in propria persona*: the "dictum that all is fair in love and war" is "frankly villainous." This is *parrhesia*, frank speech, and its purpose, as in the *ad baculum* rebuttal of 1885, is to orient the reader to Bierce's attitude by providing a touchstone against which the reader may test his inferences.

The *metonymy* (deliberate blurring of the distinction between weapon and weapon carrier), the *hypotyposis* (mimicry of acts), and the *mimesis* (turbid and turgid prose jargons), carry an implicit anti-war message. Thus Bierce's close and unruffled description of killing and dying bears in its patterns a perceptible value judgment on this complementary process: it is stupid and sordid, engaged in--since jargon is only solemn slang--by those "who utter with their tongues that which they think with their ears." (Northumberland is nearly out of patience himself when he expostulates to Harry, "Why, what a waspstung and impatient fool/Art thou, to break into this woman's mood,/Tying thy tongue to no ear but thine own!" [I.iii.236-38]--an interesting coincidence.) This is the context, the nimbus of implication, for the epigram-like short story. This context helps get into perspective the story's subject, Farquhar's sudden death, which is, as the story's title and first two sections suggest, objectively meaningless. He has simply blundered into a dangerous machine; he is as expendable and insignificant as a heedless cannoneer killed by the recoil of his own fieldpiece.

But Farquhar is not dead yet. It is possible (returning to the story line) for a hanging-rope to break. It has happened. At the beginning of section three we must decide what has probably happened. We are told, not that the rope had broken, but that Farquhar, whom we have seen to be in a highly suggestible mental state, and whose power of thought had been effaced and somehow restored, "knew" that the rope had broken. What has happened? His physical senses are "preternaturally keen and alert." Is this a heightening or an hallucination? Did he fall into the stream or not? At this point we cannot say for sure, but we can remember the earlier brief immersions in Farquhar's consciousness and wonder whether in this last and longest section of the story we are on the outside looking in or on the inside looking out.

In his essay on the electric chair, after the passage quoted, Bierce comes to the point: "Theories of the painlessness of sudden death appear to be based mostly upon the fact that those who undergo it make no entries of their sensations in their diaries" (366). Most of this third section of "Owl Creek Bridge" is a fictional attempt at such a diary, related by Bierce, the real "student of hanging," through Farquhar, the guinea pig. That is, section three is a first person narrative couched in the third person. Professor Marcus has found that the whole story is told by an "omniscient author" (p. 14). One might point out to him (without bothering to quibble about the difference between "author" and "narrator") that, if so, it is a strangely limited "omniscient author" ("What he heard was the ticking of his watch." "What a sluggish stream!"). That, however, is the way Marcus reads the story--third person omniscient.

The rest of us may find another point of view. Indeed, the whole story is "a lesson in perspective," as Woodruff so aptly titled his consideration of it. Or, what comes to the same thing, it is an exercise in "the faculty of discrimination"--a faculty dormant or absent in both Farquhar and "bad readers" (we may recall Bierce's rather edgy characterization of such readers in the *Argonaut*). There is an initial, strange uncertainty: could a man--however "exalted and refined" his "organic system"--see a million distinct blades of grass, and the dewdrops on each blade, and the prisms in each drop, and the colors in each prism? We, at least, can see the ironical violet here: Farquhar is a man, not an eagle. Thomas Erskine, himself a keen-eyed critic, is probably right when he says that most readers accept this, what he calls, "outrageous hyperbole." But there is little excuse for such readers--Marcus among them--to do so, because Farquhar's perceptions really are outrageous.

And Bierce even points this out, as directly as he is able. Farquhar's senses are making "record of things never before perceived." This is the trope *adianoeta*, deliberate ambiguousness. Bierce used it deftly in the Heath, Simpson, and Morrison passages, but he never used it to better effect than he does here. This trope enables Bierce to ask his reader, subtly but pointedly, Perceived by whom? If by Farquhar only, then to make this explicit, "they had" should appear between "things" and "never." But the wording as it is leaves the question barely open: it may be only Farquhar who has never sensed such things; it may well be that no human has ever sensed them; probably no percipient creature has ever done so. The conclusion following the latter two interpretations is obvious, and these two are supported by the record of Farquhar's astonishing sensations.

Could Farquhar (to take another example) hear a water spider's legs moving on the same flood in which he is now presumably immersed--could he hear this above the rush of the torrent and the rasp of his own half-strangled breathing? Perhaps; very probably not. The details are vivid, concrete, almost tangible; but from whom do they proceed? These details are too concrete and vivid. "A fish slid along beneath his *eyes* and he *heard* the rush of its body parting the water" (my emphases). The phrasing suggests that Farquhar comes close to a synaesthetic experience, at a time when he is supposedly bending every effort to survive. Again, however, this may not be absolutely impossible.

But when we are told that as he surfaced he could see the bridge and the fort (that is, he was far enough downstream for such a comprehensive view), but that the figures on the bridge were gigantic; and when we are told that at this distance he could see the eye and the color of the eye of the man who is shooting at him, although this man is to Farquhar a silhouette--by definition a dark featureless form in outline--then we must conclude that the grey eye is Farquhar's own, that it is turned inward, and that the "visible world" of which he is the "pivotal point" is also likely all his own.

Now, Farquhar couldn't have seen these last two sights for the same reason that God cannot make a huge midget or a square circle. Bierce expected his readers to see these logical lapses, to follow them closely, and to evaluate them--perhaps because he was himself a very close reader. In an essay (for example) written in 1903, titled "The Moon in Letters" (*Works*, IX, 58-67), he takes a number of authors to task for their "private systems of astronomy," for "their ignorance of what is before their eyes all their blessed lives." After listing several celestial impossibilities in a novel by H. Rider Haggard, he has this to say:

> A writer who believes that the new moon can rise in the east soon after sunset and the full moon at ten o'clock; who thinks the second of these remarkable phenomena can occur twenty-four hours after the first, and itself be followed some fourteen hours later by an eclipse of the sun--such a man may be a gifted writer, but I am not a gifted reader.

The novelist William Black has been even less attentive than Haggard:

> In dismissing Black I cannot forbear to add that even if the moon could rise in the south; even if rising in the south it should continue rising into the dome when it should be setting; even if . . .

And Bierce praises Edgar Saltus for having an "imagination robust enough to conceive a crescent moon in the east at nightfall."

> I have found similar blunders in the poems of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Schiller, Moore, Shelley, Tennyson and Bayard Taylor. Of course a poet is entitled to any kind of universe that may best suit his purpose, and if he could give us better poetry by making the moon rise "full-orbed" in the northwest and set like a "tin sickle" in the zenith I should go in for letting him have his fling. But I do not discern any gain in "sweetness and light" from these despotic readjustments of the relations among sun, earth and moon, and must set it all down to the account of ignorance, which, in any degree and however excusable, is not a thing to be admired.

In the story, Bierce further encourages us to see Farquhar and not Farquhar's heavenly world, by meticulous choice and placement of words. Three definite statements, after Farquhar "surfaces" ("he was . . . they were . . . had exalted"), are followed, in the rest of the paragraph and in the next two, by "perceived," "looked at," "saw," "saw," "noted," "saw," "saw," "gazing," "observed." The objects of these perceptions are arranged in a pattern of lessening probability, from the entirely possible (individual trees) to the logical contradiction (detail and color in a silhouette). Bierce the oculist is helpfully indicating with his pointer increasingly large figures on his eye-chart.

Mary Grenander writes that, "in 'An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge,' the reader unless he be extremely acute, does not realize the true state of affairs until the end of the story . . . ."[17] Gordon W. Cunliffe disagrees: "it is only a surprise ending to the very unsophisticated reader"; and Thomas Erskine thinks that Bierce "leaves us all the clues we need to know that the escape is unreal."[18] I must side with Erskine and Cunliffe here, with a few reservations. The real question is not so much sophistication or the lack of it, but of knowing one's author. The very unsophisticated cannot know Bierce, but the very sophisticated may not know him. That is why we find Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren complaining about the lack of "meaningful irony" and so forth.[19] They noticed a resemblance between "Owl Creek Bridge" and "The Furnished Room," read Bierce as if he were O. Henry, closed their eyes to the differences between genius and near-adequacy, and misunderstood this piece of fiction.

Neither eminent critic nor secondary schooler likes to feel betrayed, to be left hanging ("God damn it to hell" was the candid response of a high school friend upon reaching the end of the story), but that is what happens unless the reader really reads this story. The more he knows about Bierce, the likelier he is to do so. And by tracing his stylistic growth in the newspapers we have gained the best possible perspective from which to view Bierce's other work, we have become attuned to the Biercean manner, and have thus become the sort of readers he desired and, needless to say, deserved. For us there is no surprise ending because there is no surprise.

As we have seen (and will, for a few more pages), the ending is in the beginning and throughout. By using patterns of logic, letters, and words Bierce consistently alters and subverts the meanings of those words. In short, the words go one way, the patterns go the other, and this constitutes a stick in the spokes comparable to the one that sent Bierce's persona sprawling in the attack on the Faith through faith of 1870. The technique (or, more precisely, series of related techniques) is the syntactic reverse english Bierce imparts to his semantic cue ball, to make it travel in one direction for a time but spin in the opposite direction.

Eye chart and pointer, stick and spokes, cue and cueball--the metaphors are intended to suggest that, before we are very far into part three, Bierce's careful pedagogy should have made us aware that we are participating in an hallucination, a fascinating one. And we can relish the imagery: grains of sand flashing like emeralds, trees like great flowers diffusing their fragrance on a wind made musical by their branches, and over all a rosy glow.

Still, for the reader sympathetic to Farquhar there is the faint but lingering hope that although the external world is imagined the escape into it is not--surely he would otherwise be long dead. But then there is the all-night trudge through the enchanted wood, and a simultaneous and gradual final shift in point of view. The narrator is returning from inside Farquhar, abandoning him, and an indication of this return is the recrudescence of the troubling dubieties which began the story, and which proliferated at the beginning of section three. The forest, earlier recognized as a mammoth formal garden, is now trackless, orderless, and "seemed" interminable--in fact, "he had *not* known that he lived in so wild a region" (my emphasis). And, though he has been guiding himself by the sun all day, and is lost the whole time, at night, orienting himself by "great golden stars . . . grouped in strange constellations" he came upon a road and "knew" that it led in the right direction. He hears things, senses others, but plunges on.

This change in point of view is heralded, as in the beginning of the story, by a brief bit of verse: "great golden stars . . . grouped in strange constellations" is four dactyls, minus an unstressed end syllable. The *g*-, *r*-, and *s*-alliteration, and the long *a*-assonance make it quite pleasing to the ear--my ear--but the sense of it is alive with foreboding.

Although stars seldom enlarge, change color, and regroup, the sympathetic reader may still choose, at this point, to interpret this nightmare journey as the distorted impressions of a man half dead and three quarters insane from a terrible ordeal, whose unimpaired homing instinct drags him onward--through a welter of increasingly sinister adjectives: "strange," "uncanny," "unfamiliar," "strange," "secret," "malign," "unknown." This is, roughly, *auxesis*, words in climactic order. I say roughly, because "unknown" is, on the face of it, less ominous than the preceding "malign." But just as "strange" gains force through repetition here, so does "unknown" become more portentous by echoing the "not known" in the paragraph above. As Walter Raleigh puts it: "Where words are not fitted with a single hard definition, rigidly observed, all repetition is a kind of delicate punning, bringing slight differences of application into clear relief."[20]

Thus two instances of the figure *conduplicatio* contribute to and help constitute the over-all figure *auxesis*. Also, "unknown" here at the end of section three tends to cancel the crucial "knew" that broke the rope at its beginning. Finally, there are litmus traces of *ploce* here: the key "knews" and "sees" do not mean the same thing here as they did earlier. They become, in the course of the story, synonyms for "imagines."

The sympathetic reader will ignore this almost subliminally delicate pattern of hints, and may ignore the dozens of broader ones, such as the astounding feat of a man in Farquhar's condition covering the (at least) thirty miles to his home before a spring or summer sunrise --that is, at a dead run. Such a reader would also have to miss the strange shift to the present tense in the middle of the penultimate paragraph, as well as the expressions of uncertainty that come crowding in at this point with grim irony: "doubtless . . . he had fallen asleep while walking," "perhaps he has merely recovered from a delirium," "he must have travelled the entire night."

But before overlooking these things the reader who fully shares Farquhar's perspective must overlook a set-piece, a paragraph that merits being quoted entire:

> His neck was in pain and lifting his hand to it he found it horribly swollen. He knew that it had a circle of black where the rope had bruised it. His eyes felt congested; he could not close them. His tongue was swollen with thirst; he relieved its fever by thrusting it forward from between his teeth into the cold air. How softly the turf had carpeted the untraveled avenue--he could no longer feel the roadway beneath his feet![21]

Here Bierce's own tongue is thrust firmly in his cheek, and we can catch a clear echo of his charnel wit. This is not to say that the paragraph or any other part of "Owl Creek Bridge" is funny. We may recall Bierce's cautionary note on witticisms, that "he who laughs confesses that he does not understand." There is nothing funny about this blackly comic description with its ingenuous exclamation point, but it is the essence of wit, balancing as it does escape and non-escape, keeping the former in the realm of feeling and the latter in the realm of knowledge. Matthew Hodgart's admirable definition of wit, quoted at the beginning of this study, bears repetition here at the end of it: "Wit is the effect of perceiving an idea or event, simultaneously or in quick alternation, in two habitually incompatible frames of reference . . . the event is bisociated." Bierce perceives the hanging as, simultaneously, victim and spectator; his words conveying the former viewpoint, the scene evoked by the words conveying the latter.

To be more precise: the narrative clearly denotes flight, but the arrangement of the sentences calls attention to them and thus enables connotation to have its full effect as well. Two Bierceean stand-bys, the figures *isocolon* and *anaphora* ("His . . . he . . . He . . . His . . . he . . . His . . . he . . . he") accomplish this, and yield in the process an abbreviated *effictio*--one as vivid in its way as the early word painting of the political hack ("Look at that man's face. Look at his face!").

Enough pressure has been put on the language here in this one to make it bear a contradiction, two mutually exclusive options. Here the cue ball stops, and begins rolling and spinning in the same direction; here the oculist indicates the biggest figure on the chart and gives it a sharp rap with his pointer. This static and grisly *effictio* in the midst of the escape sequence, the final Biercean reversal which clearly prefigures the denouement, has as its effect a second trope *anacephalaeosis*, a recapitulation of the message in the figures. The reader who had kept his perspective, the attentive Biercean, is brought up short, shown that Farquhar has been requited for his folly, told that there has been no escape; and the shock in the following paragraph, and in the last one, is less shock than brusque confirmation of something previously divined.

But what, one may ask, about all the gunfire? Was it all auditory hallucination?--surely it seemed real enough. I suggest that the sounds and tactile sensations were real but misconstrued and incorporated into the visual hallucination, that the explosions Farquhar hears are the sounds of his cervical vertebrae separating. His pain is our guide (one of them) to what is happening to him, as the cannon smoke is to be his. He first feels "the pain of a sharp pressure", then, when the noose tightens (and he imagines that he has thrown it off) comes "the direst pang that he had yet experienced"; finally, when the noose is at its tightest (and he imagines that he has drawn a breath) he experiences "a supreme and crowning agony." These successive pains are followed (later since they are echoes of the nervous system's destruction being picked up and relayed back to that nervous system through the ears--"the report arrives too late") by a succession of sounds. First, there are two sharp reports from the imagined rifles; then "dulled thunder" from the imagined volley; and finally "an explosion which stirred the very river [i.e., Farquhar himself] to its deeps!" As his spinal cord begins to sever it has not lost all ability to transmit pain. He feels "uncomfortably warm" "between his collar and his neck"--and retrieves an imaginary bullet from the first imagined volley. This last pang is heard, much later, as "a whiz and rattle of grapeshot among the branches high above his head." Finally, he dies from a blow "with a sound like the shock of a cannon."

It may be objected here that the sounds and pains are poorly synchronized. Between each pain and its corresponding report there are increasingly long intervals when there should, anatomically, be increasingly short ones--indeed, if the spinal cord were nearly severed before the sound of the grapeshot in the branches, that would mean that Farquhar is compressing an imaginary twenty-four hours into one incalculably tiny fraction of a second.

Yet that is Bierce's point precisely. He makes it explicitly at the story's end, ruling out any possibility of the comparatively slow death of strangulation: Farquhar had a "broken neck" and his dreaming was therefore done in an instant. The watch tells us that Farquhar's mind is accelerating (geometrically, in the manner of the falling body that he is) in proportion to the real world's apparent deceleration; that as the real time left to him dwindles to nothing subjective time expands this remnant, maintaining the balance. This is the hypothesis for the "careful and analytic record of" Farquhar's "sensations at every stage of his mischance"; this is the starting point for Bierce's

*"A Diary of Sudden Death; by a Public-Spirited Observer on the Inside."*[22]

The theoretical arrow of Zeno is a good analogy here since the premise of the story is inferable as a corollary of this ancient conundrum. Zeno's arrow never reached its target because before it could do so it had first to traverse half the distance, then half the remaining distance, etc., with eighths, sixteenths, thirty-seconds, sixty-fourths, and so on, endlessly interposing themselves. The arrow can get very close, but since a mathematical line has only location and direction and not area, one can always be drawn half way between approaching point and static plane. For the archer this would be sufficiently discouraging. But when he reflects that his arrow can never get more than half-way anywhere, that the unattainable target may be nearly touching the arrowhead before the shaft leaves the bow, then he will realize that the shaft never can leave the bow, and that motion is impossible; and he will trudge sadly home. Zeno's assumption is that space is infinitely divisible; Bierce's, that time is infinitely divisible. It follows that if the human brain could perform that function and thus generate its own reprieve then death would be impossible, and Farquhar, thinking "with the rapidity of lightning," would be forever *in extremis*--immortal in some private fifth dimension.

But of course archery did not languish for the twenty-five hundred years between the time of Zeno and that of Georg Cantor and Bertrand Russell, who finally solved the logical paradox logically. The arrow completes its flight unimpeded and the hanged man's neck is broken. Dr. Davidson's observation on Farquhar's escape, made at the close of her essay, is to the point: "The task can be accomplished imaginatively. But the noose and broken neck cannot be denied" (p. 14). And Stuart

Woodruff has noted that Farquhar's body swinging back and forth beneath the timbers is like a pendulum (a nice touch here, by author and critic)[23]--it would be difficult to find a better symbol for a man whose personal time has stopped because objective time has not. Shakespeare says it best of all; Hotspur is nearly dead (V.iii.81-83):

> But thoughts (the slaves of life) and life (time's fool)
> And time, that takes survey of all the world,
> Must have a stop.

My suggestion is that the story gets much of its power from the opposition of two logics, that this is the submerged origin of Woodruff's "split." Just as Bierce juxtaposes antagonistic jargons, key words, and (in the *effictio*) connotations and denotations, he also pairs philosophical logic with the logic of natural law. To Farquhar, death can't be real, so the escape must be; to the Biercean reader, the reader who notices the series of contradictions and gross improbabilities, it is just the other way around.

The story combines ingenious speculation with adroit and refined satire. The fictional result is superb art. Stephen Crane may have been correct about "Owl Creek Bridge" when he wrote to Richard Harding Davis that "nothing better exists--that story has everything."[24] Whether it has everything or not is a moot point, but it does have much that we have noticed in his better journalism. The story has wit. It has logic: it not only depends for its proper understanding and appreciation upon particular correct appraisals of the logically probable and improbable, possible and impossible, but it seems grounded in an idea that is at bottom a logical one. The story has precision and concision, vividness and concreteness; and it has enough unpredictability, due to the reversals, to keep it a story and not a mere exercise. It incorporates subtle uses of the persona, and of the tropes *mimesis*, *hypotyposis*, *effictio*, *adianoeta*, *metonymy*, *anacephalaeosis*, and *ploce*. These are some of the distinguishing Biercean stylistic traits.

The story also has that centripetal compressive quality that I have posited as being integral to Bierce's best writing, and it displays this quality on a number of levels and in a number of different patterns. Key words are repeated, especially the crucial ones that convey knowledge and feeling, reality and appearance. The story is bracketed by clusters of synonyms for "see," "is," and "seem" toward the beginning and end, and these serve to get into perspective the all-important "knews." This extensive variation and repetition in places constitutes the figure *conduplicatio*.

On a smaller scale, the figures *anaphora*, *auxesis*, *isocolon*, and alliteration help, as does the occasionally metric rhythm, to emphasize the connotations and denotations of pivotal words and sections, and to bring out the meaning and ironies latent in these. Thus the syntax stacks, in the story's three sections, a small train load of semantic freight in the engine, caboose, and one boxcar.

Also, Bierce consistently uses the sense-deferring, content ordering left and mid-branch sentences. Here is a left-branch:

> The water, touched to gold by the early sun, the brooding mists under the banks at some distance down the stream, the fort, the soldiers, the piece of drift--all had distracted him.

Here is another, containing a mid-branch, the whole sentence being followed by a short, laconic sentence which constitutes the trope *litotes* and the figure *brevitas* (this is a combination we have seen used several times to good effect in the journalism, particularly in the

Hemphill passage of 1877):

> As these thoughts, which have here to be set down in words, were flashed into the doomed man's brain rather than evolved from it the captain nodded to the sergeant. The sergeant stepped aside.

One more left-branching sentence, with an appositive right branch:

> Encompassed in a luminous cloud, of which he was now merely the fiery heart, without material substance, he swung through unthinkable arcs of oscillation, like a vast pendulum.

The mid-branch in the long, compound-complex sentence following contains a glaring mistake--further evidence of Farquhar's abstraction (one does not relate a "nature"; one relates "circumstances"; disagreement of noun and verb results in dissension between the subject of the first independent clause and the object of the preposition, and leaves the relative pronoun "which" with no clear antecedent):

> Circumstances of an imperious nature, which it is unnecessary to relate here, had prevented him from taking service with the gallant army that had fought the disastrous compaigns ending with the fall of Corinth, and he chafed under the inglorious restraint, longing for the release of his energies, the larger life of the soldier, the opportunity for distinction.

Below are four more sentences which gain point through their mid-branching structure (the figure *parenthesis*). The second of these is a mid-branch variant, since it brackets the grammatically intrinsic with the grammatically extrinsic, instead of the other way around; that is, it can also be thought of as a left- and right- branching sentence.

> "Suppose a man--a civilian and student of hanging--should elude the picket post . . ."

> An hour later, after nightfall, he repassed the plantation, going northward in the direction from which he had come. [and, again, the *litotes* and *brevitas* follow] He was a federal scout.

> From this state he was awakened--ages later, it seemed to him--by the pain of a sharp pressure upon his throat . . .

> . . . His body, with a broken neck, swung gently from side to side beneath the timbers of the Owl Creek bridge.

The story itself is one large mid-branch in form, with section two, the exposition, pared down and injected into the instant in which Farquhar's footing becomes totally unsteadfast, between the sergeant's stepping aside and the noose's beginning to tighten. Beginning in the middle of things was hardly a Bierce innovation, but the application of the technique here is certainly an aid to compression: even Bierce could not leave Farquhar hanging for too long in the parenthesis of section two. Viewed in a slightly different way, "Owl Creek Bridge" in precis is seen to fall readily into a series of parenthetical encapsulations:

> "A man" (whose neck is in a noose, is watching a stream below him and fixing his thoughts on his family [whose name is Peyton Farquhar, aristocrat and patriot (whose mind, working ever more quickly as he falls [and whose imagination, fusing final perception and final memory (which fusion, giving rise to a split second hallucination [which hallucination, keeping reality at bay (which reality, never totally effaced, reasserts itself as a stunning blow on the back of Farquhar's neck [who, at this juncture])])])]) "was dead."

The *medias res* suggests another classical formula: surely no dramatic unfolding ever observed the unities so relentlessly.[25] The place could not be fixed more rigidly or accurately with a plumb-bob (I cannot help but feel that the choice of the preposition "at" in the title is as deliberate as everything else in the story); the time, the traditional twenty-four hours, is imaginary, is really one second; and the important objective action is the tightening of a noose. This noose is very important.

I have been calling Bierce's best prose "compressive"; in "Owl Creek Bridge" a better word might be "implosive." The noose helps the logic and the syntax to achieve this effect. First, of course, it is the objective instrument of a violent constriction, for Farquhar and, vicariously, for the reader to the extent that he sees Farquhar's world and not Farquhar. Second, it is the cause of both the rushing subjective expansion (escape and flight), and the objective psychological contraction (a mind retreating frantically in upon itself). Third, and figuratively speaking, the noose lies tightly looped about the story itself, appearing at the beginning and end and evident throughout, squeezing it into its eighteen pages and four thousand words--that is, the urgency of the hanging precludes superfluities of any kind, and is analogous to Bierce's intolerance of the inessential.

Finally, and symbolically, the noose around the neck is a good metaphor for Bierce's view of the human condition. Woodruff calls this story, very properly, "the best one [Bierce] ever wrote" (p. 153). He does so because "Owl Creek Bridge" portrays more powerfully than any of the stories the main Biercean theme: disparity between potentiality and actuality, between inevitable striving and inevitable disappointment.

If some critic decided to see in "Owl Creek Bridge" an etherealized Biercean pun on the Fall of Man, he would get no argument from me. And here in the latent allegorical force of the story lies one source of its power, and of the resentment one tends to feel toward the story and because of it: there is a tendency to identify with Farquhar, which we may use our wits to combat; but when our wits tell us, too, that Farquhar, as a mortal, is also (if hardly a Socrates) an Adam, then we realize that Farquhar is being identified with us whether we like it or not. Farquhar is mortal (his foolishness serving only to educe this trait); Farquhar is a man; all men are mortal. The disappointment for the bad reader lies in the unhappy ending; the disappointment (if such it is) for the good reader lies in the reminder that the happy ending is ultimately impossible--is, strictly speaking, a contradiction in terms.

"To communicate an emotion," writes John Middleton Murray (*Problem of Style*, p. 68), "means, in fact, to impose an emotion." Eighteen pages later he suggests how this might be done: "The essential quality of style is a precision of emotional suggestion [attained through the use of some symbol or analogy] for the writer's emotion or thought which would exercise a kind of compulsion upon the mind of the reader." He is no doubt right. I am suggesting that Bierce's noose is just such a precise symbol or analog for the human predicament, for the way Bierce saw that predicament, for the way his mind operated in transforming this perception into brief literary forms, and for the centripetal style that results from this transformation of perception. Here, the noose as symbol welds form to content--that is, it exerts a subtle and profound influence on the work in which it appears: there simply is not room for anything extraneous. This compressiveness dictates a form that is as concise as possible. The concision, in turn, makes heavy demands on the diction and syntax: if only a relatively few words are to be used, then they must be the right ones, properly arranged. They must be precise, concrete, and vivid in order to communicate, accurately and economically, the various necessary thoughts, sensations, and emotions. Finally, if this compacted and self-contained work is to be at once interesting and truthful, its beginning must include its ending, but it must be to some extent unpredictable as well as predictable. That is, the logical content (syllogistic argument, hypothesis, premise, assumption, and clues to assist the reader's induction) must be evident but not obvious. If too deeply implicit, these logical inclusions will be overlooked and therefore valueless; if too obvious, the work of art becomes a riddle or equation with frills. But when the logic is handled as deftly as it is here, then the style and the work itself take on a force which a style less dense or a lengthier work will have difficulty matching.

Bierce, in this story, characteristically implied a great deal more than he wrote; the implication on his few pages has had the effect of multiplying my pages of explication. Because "Owl Creek Bridge" is brief this analysis has been long, but it must have a stop--and will, after one last observation: the story's final jolting sentence, unpredictable inversely to the amount of care expended on the preceding ones, is Bierce's *epiphonema*, illuminating what has gone before, killing Farquhar, and jerking the reader back to the first sentence, to the "swift water" that Farquhar sees and does not see.

## NOTES

[1] *Understanding Fiction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Appletion, 1959), short excerpt rpt. in *From Fiction to Film: Ambrose Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge*," eds. Gerald R. Barrett and Thomas L. Erskine, Dickenson Literature and Film Series, No. 2 (Encino, Cal.: Dickenson, 1973), pp. 52, 53.

[2] "Emma Frances Dawson," s.v. "The Reviewer," *Works*, X, 167.

[3] *The Short Stories of Ambrose Bierce* (Pittsburg: Pittsburg Univ. Press, 1964), p. 157.

[4] "Ambrose Bierce and the Art of War," *Essays in Literary History*, ed. Rudolf Kirk (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1960), p. 237.

[5] Woodruff, p. 156.

[6] "Language and Theme in 'An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge,'" in Barrett and Erskine, op. cit., p. 71.

[7] Her analysis, "Literary Semantics in the Fiction of Ambrose Bierce," will appear in a forthcoming issue of *ETC., A Review of General Semantics* (San Francisco). This article is a revision of a chapter in "The Poetics of Perception: A Semantic Analysis of the Short Fiction of Ambrose Bierce," Diss. S.U.N.Y. (Binghamton) 1974.

[8] "Crossing the Bar Twice: Post-Mortem Consciousness in Bierce, Hemingway, and Golding," *Studies in Short Fiction*, 6 (Summer 1969), p. 363. Crane takes a condescending view of the story: "if we find Bierce's work pale in ["The Snows of Kilimanjaro's"] light and, especially, in that of the more extensive attempt by Golding, we can easily forgive him" (pp. 362-63). Crane has isolated four stages in this "post-mortem consciousness" (a term which he rightly notes is a misnomer): time slows; hypersensitivity; temporary alternate reality; "at the very moment this fantastic experience seems to the endurer most clear, most real, and most ultimately satisfying, he dies" (p. 362).

[9] "Clay," *Dubliners* (1916; rpt. New York: Viking, 1962), p. 101.

[10] "'An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge,'" *Insight*, 1 (1962), rpt. in Barrett and Erskine, op. cit., p. 56.

[11] 1H4 I.iii.127-28, *The Yale Shakespeare*, eds. Tucker Brooke and Sanuel B. Hemingway (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1947).

[12] *The Beginnings of Naturalism in American Fiction* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1950). Ahnebrink thinks it likely that Crane read *Soldiers and Civilians* before writing *Red Badge of Courage*; He bolsters this contention by quoting from a Crane letter: "I deeply admire some short stories by Mr. Bierce" (p. 103).

[13] Even afterward, in Farquhar's imagination, the company continues to behave in this slow and controlled manner. As the mechanical "fire" chant goes up we are told that "the lieutenant on shore was taking a part in the morning's work," and two pages later that "the cannon had taken a part in the game."

[14] Erskine has noticed this too: the passage reads, he says, "like 'How To' instructions with short, choppy sentences, step-by-step chronological order--only the numbers are missing" (p. 71).

[15] Davidson, p. 10.

[16] Loc. cit.

[17] *Ambrose Bierce* (New York: Twayne, 1971), p. 96.

[18] Barrett and Erskine, pp. 55, 69. Neither critic, however, gives many examples of the sort of clues that a sophisticated reader would be likely to pick up; nobody, so far as I am aware, has caught the most obvious ones, the logical contradictions. Woodruff, moving from a consideration of things he thinks couldn't have happened--seeing the dew drops, etc.--to a consideration of things that didn't happen, even quotes part of the passage in question: "Excited soldiers, silhouetted 'against the blue sky,' shout and gesticulate, Farquhar is spun and buffeted by the current, shots spatter all around him and he dives 'as deeply as he could.' . . ." Woodruff comments: "It is this kind of specific detail [presumably including the eye in the silhouette and the colossal soldiers in the distance] that keeps persuading the reader that perhaps the impossible has happened, that the rope did break and that soon Farquhar will be safe in the forest" (p. 158).

[19] Ibid., p. 53.

[20] "Synonyms: And the 'Perfect Word,'" *Modern Essays on Writing and Style*, ed. Paul C. Wermuth (New York: Holt, 1964), p. 81.

[21] Both Woodruff and Erskine have noticed this (pp. 159, 74, resp.).

[22] "The Chair of Little Ease," *Works*, XI, 366-67. The title of Bierce's article is, significantly, the colloquial term for the instrument of that slow and most horrible of deaths, impalement.

[23] Woodruff, p. 155.

[24] Berkove quotes this letter toward the close of his fifth chapter.

[25] Except, perhaps, Bierce's "One of the Missing" (*Works*, II, 71-92), in which, except for the time needed to maneuver him into that position, the victim is immobilized.

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# Glossary of Rhetorical Terms
(Adapted from Lanham's *Handlist*)

Acyrologia. Use of an inexact or illogical word

Adianoeta. Deliberate equivocation.

Agnominatio. A play on the sounds of words.

Aischrologia. Foul abuse; billingsgate.

Alliteration. Recurrence of an initial consonant sound.

Anacephalaeosis. A summary.

Anaphora. Repetition of the same word at the beginning of successive clauses or verses.

Antiphrasis. Irony of one word.

Antirrhesis. Rejection of an argument because of its insignificance, error, or wickedness.

Antithesis. Joining contrasting ideas.

Apodioxis. Indignant rejection of an argument because of its impertinence or absurd falsity.

Apomnemonysis. The quotation of an approved authority.

Apophasis. Affirmation by seeming denial.

Apostrophe. Breaking off discourse to address directly some person or thing either present or absent.

Ara. A curse or imprecation.

Argumentum ad hominem. An argument based on the character of one's opponent.

Argumentum ad Ignorantiam. Contending that a proposition is true if it has not been proved false.

Asiatismus. A highly ornamented style lacking matter.

Assonance. Resemblance or similarity in sound between vowel-sounds preceded and followed by differing consonant-sounds in words close together.

Asyndeton. Omission of conjunctions between words, phrases, or clauses.

Atticism. The mid-first-century B.C. reaction against asiatismus.

**Auxesis.** Words or clauses placed in climactic order.

**Barbaralexis.** Unnatural words or mispronunciation.

**Bathos.** An unsuccessful and usually humorous attempt at the sublime.

**Bomphiologia.** Bombast.

**Brevitas.** Concise expression.

**Cacozelia.** Adaptation of Latin words or inkhorn terms.

**Catachresis.** A wrenched or extravagant metaphor.

**Cataplexis.** A threatening of punishment, misfortune, or disaster.

**Characterismus.** Description of the body or mind.

**Chiasmus.** Inverting the order of repeated words to sharpen their sense or to contrast the ideas they convey or both (AB:BA).

**Conduplicatio.** Repetition of a word or words in succeeding clauses.

**Continuatio.** A long, full sentence.

**Diazeugma.** One subject with many verbs.

**Dilemma.** Any technique of argument which offers only unacceptable choices to one's opponent.

**Distinctio.** Explicit reference to various meanings of a word, to remove ambiguity; definition of terms.

**Ecphonesis.** Exclamation expressing emotion.

**Effictio.** Description of a person's outward appearance.

**Effiguration.** Elaborate description of an object or event.

**Ellipsis.** Omission of a word easily understood.

**Energia.** Clear, vivid description.

**Epergesis.** Apposition.

**Epimone.** A refrain.

**Epiphonema.** A witty saying; a phrase added by way of ornament or as a finishing touch.

**Epiplexis.** Asking questions to reproach or upbraid.

**Exergasia.** Repeating the same thought in many forms.

Figure. A general term for any striking or unusual configuration of words or phrases.

Hyrmos. A long sentence in which the sense is suspended through a series of parallel elements.

Hyperbaton. Departure from ordinary word order.

Hyperbole. Self-conscious exaggeration.

Hypotyposis. Mimicry of acts.

Ignoratio Elenchi. An irrelevant conclusion.

Irony. Expressing a meaning directly opposite the one intended.

Isocolon. Repetition of phrases of equal length and usually corresponding structure.

Litotes. Understatement that intensifies.

Megaloprepeia. Magnificent, elevated utterance.

Meiosis. To belittle, often through a trope of one word; to use a degrading epithet.

Metabasis. A figure of transition.

Metaphor. Assertion of figurative identity rather than, as with simile, likeness.

Metonymy. Among other things, the substitution of one thing for something with which it is associated.

Non Sequitur. A statement bearing no relation to the preceding context.

Ominatio. Prophecy of evil.

Onomatopoeia. Use or invention of words that sound like their meanings.

Oxymoron. A witty, paradoxical saying; a condensed paradox.

Paradox. A seemingly self-contradictory statement.

Paralepsis. Emphasis by pointed omission.

Parataxis. Clauses or phrases arranged independently, sometimes without connectives.

Parelcon. Addition of superfluous words.

Parenthesis. A word, phrase, or sentence inserted as an aside in a sentence complete in itself.

Paronomasia. Punning; playing on the sounds and meanings of words.

Parrhesia. Frank speech.

Periphrasis. Circumlocution.

Prosopopoeia. Personification.

Petitio Principii. Begging the question; an argument in which the premise and conclusion are mutual paraphrases.

Pleonasmus. Needless repetition.

Ploce. Repetition of a word with a new signification after the intervention of another word or words.

Post Hoc Ergo Propter Hoc. The argument which mistakes a temporal for a causal relationship.

Prosonomasia. Calling by a nickname.

Protrope. Exhorting hearers to action by threats or promises.

Reductio ad Absurdum. To disprove a proposition one validly deduces from it an impossible or self-contradictory conclusion.

Secundum Quid. The false argument which confuses the whole with the part and vice versa.

Simile. The device which likens one thing to another, dissimilar thing.

Synecdoche. Substitution of part for whole, genus for species, or vice versa.

Synonymia. Amplification by synonym.

Systrophe. Heaping up of descriptions of a thing without defining it.

Tapinosis. Undignified language that debases a person or thing.

Trope. A device which changes the meaning of a word or words rather than simply arranging them--as does figure, *q.v.*--in a pattern of some sort.

Zeugma. One verb governs several congruent words or clauses, each in a different way.